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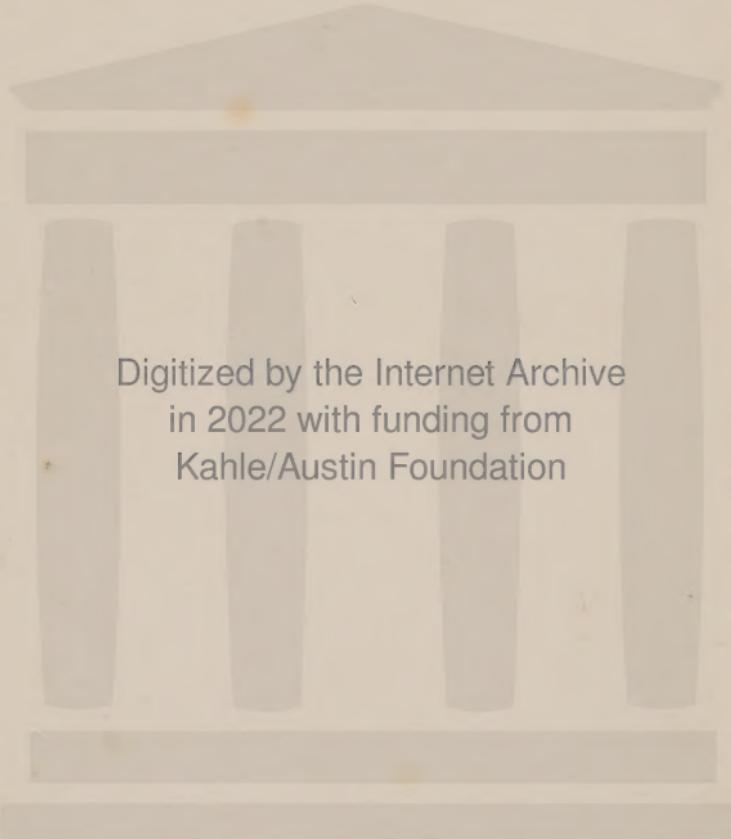
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THE ROSSETTI AND OTHER TALES

THE ROSSETTI

And Other Tales

By

E. TEMPLE THURSTON



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ЛІТТЕРАРІЯ ЭНТ

СІДІЛ СІДІЛ БА

ІСТОРИЧНИЙ АЛМАЗ

First published 1926

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To

NORMAN AND ADINE O'NEILL
for all the joy of music
they have given me

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THE ROSSETTI

I

THE SARACEN'S HEAD

SHE was the daughter of the proprietor of the Saracen's Head, the principal inn and only hotel in the little town of Wittenden.

Wittenden is in Kent. It has the Kentish air, the up-and-downness you get in those little towns of the Weald, such as at Sutton Valence, at Hawkhurst, at Harrietsham. Twenty years ago with all its red-weathered tiling, so much of which is gone now, it lay in the hollow amongst the surrounding oak trees like a broken mosaic of red clay. A branch line of the railway touches it now upon its outskirts. Then, the nearest railway station was five miles away.

It had a market in those days, and once a week the Saracen's Head catered for the farmers' ordinary. It was no ordinary meal the pro-

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priotor gave them. Soup they had, a joint of fish—often salmon—then saddle of mutton or sirloin of beef and lastly good Cheddar cheese, with biscuits, handed round in wicker baskets. All this for half a crown, but it was a business proposition. The yard of the Saracen's Head was filled with spring carts from ten o'clock in the morning till some hours after market was over. The drink that was consumed on these occasions probably paid for the dinner twice over. Farmers and dealers were coming in and out of the bar all day long. That weekly market was their contact with the world. They came rolling along the country roads in their spring carts from their lonely farms, and no impediment, short of some serious illness, could have induced them to give up the society of those market days in Wittenden.

The Saracen's Head was one of the oldest houses in the town. It was one of the ancient coaching inns, and had served travellers on their way from London to the coast for over three hundred years. No one knew the age of the sign that depended from a rusty iron bracket above the door. It had always been there in the longest memories of Wittenden. The head of the black man it represented was almost lost in the dark background, and could only be guessed at by the

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remains of the gaudy turban, sprinkled with gems, that crowned it.

In an illustrated volume of rambles in Kent, the Saracen's Head is made one of the features. There, in the drawing, the head of the black man can be plainly distinguished. This is partly the artist's imagination and partly that desire to be graphic in the interests of a public who, they say, demands its money's-worth irrespective of the truth. That is as it may be. The sign of the Saracen's Head is not at all as it is depicted in the book. Twenty years ago it was no more clearly defined than it is now.

There was a copy of that book always on the table in the hall of the hotel entrance. The drawings were signed by the name of Hewlett. But no one remembered any artist of that name ever having come to Wittenden. There was nothing surprising in that. Many artists came there. There were corners in the High Street and in Stone Street that composed themselves in pictures to the meanest imagination. The windmill rising high out of the centre of the town had been painted scores of times. So frequently were they to be seen there that the children and messenger boys had almost lost interest in the sight of artists with easel and palette outside Grattan's, the butcher's,

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from which the best view of the windmill was to be obtained.

It was an artist who had called the proprietor's daughter "The Rossetti."

The peculiar thing about this was that the name had clung to her when there were so few in Wittenden who were acquainted with Dante Gabriel—poet or artist. As for the farmers who came into the town on market day and partook of the farmers' ordinary at the Saracen's Head, there was not one who had ever heard of him in their lives. Yet they called her—Rossetti. Some may have thought it was actually her name. Certainly the sound of it caught and lingered with the aptness of its application in their ears. It was a foreign name, and to them in that company she had a foreign look.

Her mother had been dead some time before they came to Wittenden, so that none could say where she got those full, pouting lips, her pale, oval face, her mass of dark auburn hair and her deeply shadowed eyes that clung as they looked at you.

Such features were foreign to the Kent farmer, therefore "Rossetti" seemed a proper name for her. But to any who had seen the portrait of Mrs. William Morris, the death of

The Rossetti

Beatrice or any of the pre-Raphaelite pictures engaging admiration at that time, the sobriquet was obvious enough.

She had that beauty made famous on the canvases of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Burne-Jones. Indeed, she was an example—strangely placed in those surroundings—of that peculiar phenomenon which produces so often in life a type of beauty artists have first discovered upon canvas.

The artist who had given her that name had stayed in Wittenden a few days, painting the mill, the cloth hall, a view of Stone Street, and of the town itself lying in its hollow amongst the surrounding oak trees.

She had served him with his meals in the parlour—not as a servant, but as a daughter of the house making herself useful. In the same way, sometimes, especially when there was a rush of work on market days, she helped in the bar.

The first day he was there, looking up at her placing the dishes in front of him, he had said:

“Do you know what they ought to call you?”

She had waited to hear. The waiting was in her eyes—a tender submissive listening that she gave to all who spoke to her. She had that look of waiting always, as though the world were a

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castle—a castle of Shalott, and life a lover slow in coming.

When he saw there was no answer for him but what she gave in her eyes, he told her.

“ You ought to be called ‘ The Rossetti,’ ” he said.

She asked what it meant, but when he told her about the pre-Raphaelites it conveyed nothing to her. The name slipped from her memory. He was an elderly man, a landscape painter only, given to reclusive habits. Beautiful as she was, she did not inspire him to depart from his *métier*. He watched her about the room when she was waiting upon him, but did not seek her out as others did. She would never have been called “ The Rossetti ” because of his naming her if, when he returned to London, he had not sent her a reproduction of the Mrs. Morris portrait.

The words “ Portrait of Mrs. William Morris ” he had crossed out, and in place of them he had written “ The Rossetti.” She showed it to her father. It was put up in the bar. Some of the farmers who came in declared it to be a picture of her. They read the name underneath. They did not ask what it meant. They felt and approved of the sound of it on their tongues. They called her from that time “ The Rossetti.”

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There were lovers about her—many. Her father watched with a proprietary eye, but she needed none of that protection against them. They were young farmers, young men of the town. She found the conversation and attentions of older men far preferable to these, and in the bar or on market days would always leave the hot flattery of inexperienced youth for the more mellow compliments of age.

Always it was as though she were waiting and for that sorrow rather, for which her face had marked her, than for the common satisfactions of life.

She could have married above her station. The doctor's son, when he came down from his hospital work in London, was one of the young men who frequented the bar at the Saracen's Head. It was plain to be seen from the little he drank what brought him there to the little square parlour off the common tap where all the habitués sat in a reek of tobacco smoke, talking agriculture, talking politics, talking sport, and every one of them looking again and again at The Rossetti, thinking all the variety of things that pass as thoughts in men's minds in the presence of a beautiful woman, till the clock struck its hour and the proprietor rose up, gathering the empty

The Rossetti

glasses between his fingers and saying: "Gentlemen"—which was always enough except on rowdy nights. It was said that many times over she could have married the doctor's son had she chosen. He had the marrying look in his eye. But for some reason of her own she did not encourage it. He was a timid boy. It got no farther than that look. If she was ambitious for her beauty, it was not in that direction.

She was known as the most beautiful girl in that part of Kent—the most beautiful girl of the Weald—and that name the reclusive landscape painter had given her, "The Rossetti," served to frame and enhance her beauty. The Wittenden solicitor with an occasional visitor at the white stucco house behind the two copper beeches would say after dinner in the evening:

"Come down to the Saracen's Head and have a game of billiards and see our Rossetti."

He would add it was the only billiard table in the town, but would have been truer to his thoughts had he said she was the only woman worth seeing.

Her father knew quite well the value she was to the custom at the Saracen's Head. There were two other inns and many public-houses in Witten-den. Competition was keen and the beer was

The Rossetti

good everywhere. In addition to his knowledge, he was a shrewd man. On one occasion, when a slight illness had driven her to her bed, he discovered by their inquiries how many there were who missed her, who came the next evening to ask how she was, and in the hope of seeing her amongst them again. After that, there were evenings when he would say to her:

“Don’t you go coming into the bar to-night. Stop with yourself in the parlour and be reading or sewing or whatever it is you do. I’m telling you, don’t come into the bar. They don’t want a young girl always hearing the sort of things they have for laughing at.”

Knowing well her own beauty, she might have resented these restrictions to her display of it. But the same gentle submission was about her in everything. She sat in their own parlour off the kitchen of the house, reading, which was always her pleasure, and dreaming as she read, and again and again, as the bar filled up that evening, the question would find its way through the clouds of smoke and the chattering hum of voices:

“Where is The Rossetti to-night?”

There was one man she came to whenever he called her name or even raised his head in some

The Rossetti

silent way he had of beckoning to her. She never came willingly, but inevitably always. Long before anything happened to The Rossetti, there were things said and speculations bandied about concerning her and the butler at Copthorne, Lord Surrenden's estate two miles away. Whenever his lordship was not at home, but at his London house or visiting or gone abroad, Mr. Hart came every evening to the Saracen's Head.

He was a dark and taciturn man, well over the thirties, no longer young. Quite possibly with all the guests at Copthorne, stage ladies, some of them with well-advertised claims to beauty, he had acquired a taste in women—a phrase of his own—superior to the local farmers and the young men of Wittenden. There was no doubt of his claim to a taste in wines. When on occasions at the Saracen's Head he smoked a cigar, they all assumed that it was good, but no one asked him where he got it. There were one or two who noticed that he always ripped the band off before he lit it. It was plain, they said, he did not wish it to be known what brand it was.

It was not respect they had for him in that square bar parlour of the Saracen's Head; they treated him with considerable deference. To the tradespeople who came in there, Mr. Hamble, the

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grocer, Mr. Saunders, the butcher, Mr. Vaughan, who sold carpets and window blinds, was an authority on wicker chairs and appeared on nearly all the local committees, he voiced his lordship's opinions—a distant echo perhaps. That evening it had first arrived and been hung up in the bar, together with pictures of cricket teams and large announcements of agricultural sales; he was the only one to know what *The Rossetti* meant.

"D. G. Rossetti," he said—of course, he might have seen the name on the reproduction—"D. G. Rossetti was an artist and wrote poetry."

But he knew it was a portrait of a Mrs. William Morris, whoever's wife she might be, and it was proved afterwards he was right. Mr. Tremlett, the solicitor, did not know who it was and had scarcely heard of Rossetti, but he brought a friend with him one night to play billiards who was acquainted with all that kind of thing, and he knew all about it.

The proprietor announced the next evening, as though Mr. Hart were the winner of a sweep-stake, that he was right. It was a portrait of Mrs. William Morris. His statement was received in silence, but it was a silence that was adulatory. Mr. Hart accepted his *réclame* as he would have accepted recognition of his services from a guest

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at Copthorne. He accepted it with restraint, almost impassively, as though nothing had happened but what might have been expected in the usual give and take of life.

It was to this man The Rossetti came where others failed to call her. She did not come willingly, but fatefully, as though the power were not in her to resist his summons. He talked to her of the guests who came to Copthorne, on which subject he was silent to most. He told her of the dresses ladies wore at his lordship's dinner parties, of the jewels round their necks and on their hands.

There was not the faintest doubt amongst any of the tradespeople and farmers in Wittenden that Mr. Hart appreciated her beauty, better perhaps than any of them. He was a man of taste. But they did not know he was the only one who realized that she appreciated it herself.

It was a constant astonishment to all of them that she appeared so unconscious of her beauty. There was nothing flashy about her as might have been expected in a girl in her situation and with her looks, with the attention, too, that was paid her by all who came to the Saracen's Head. She did not dress up in fine clothes on Sundays or sports-days. There was no suggestion about her

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that she was laying herself out to make a match with any man better than herself. Her gentle simplicity was as much admired by everyone as her face. She was gentle to all. She gave preference to none, yet with that one exception. She gave preference to Mr. Hart.

The butler at Copthorne had learnt all he knew about her in one moment. Cautious by nature, yet coveting her beauty from the first moment he set eyes upon her, he had seemed to know by instinct the distant thing her heart was from the common touch of life. Until some weeks after the Morris portrait had been pinned to the parlour wall and the name “Rossetti” had settled upon her in the minds of everyone, he observed that distance, approaching her only by steps, so silent that, amongst all the good-natured clamour of the others, she scarcely heard him draw near.

At length, in his lordship’s absence, he invited her one day to Copthorne to see the house and the pictures. She had no finery to put on. She went as she was, knowing with no gift of intelligence a deeper beauty in herself than that which a frock from Miss Paine’s, the draper, or a string of beads from the jeweller’s could adorn.

She walked down the gallery with him, listen-

The Rossetti

ing in a silent wonder to the stories of his lordship's ancestors, from the first Lord Surrenden, created a peer in Charles II's reign. They never reached Millais's portrait of the late Lord Surrenden, who is to be remembered for his powerful opposition to the education measures of that day.

They were standing before Romney's portrait of the Lady Elizabeth Copthorne, eldest daughter of the sixth Lord, painted when she was twenty-two, with that beauty of Emma Hamilton about her which would always have brought Romney's brush to his palette.

She had run away with her father's game-keeper. In the midst of telling her the romantic story of it, Mr. Hart had stopped with a look darker than the darkness of his face.

“Go on,” she said simply.

He looked about him—up the gallery and down. They were alone. He was a cautious man, but his nature had had no training of restraint. His lips whitened.

“Do you know you're more beautiful than she is?” he said. “Not one of those painters could have made you what you are.”

And then, before she knew the touch of him, before she even knew how close he was, his thin

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lips were bruising her full ones and his breath was all about her face.

Perhaps it was the story of the Lady Elizabeth that had fired him. Perhaps in that gallery of men and women, he saw himself cutting a figure fit for her beauty, and would have dared as much with the Lady Elizabeth herself. Whatever pinnacle of imagination he had leapt to, he knew his miscalculation the instant he left earth and found her lips. Revolt and repulsion shuddered through all her body. He was sensitive enough of that to feel it as if her open hand had smitten across his mouth. He let her go and saw her eyes then, hurt with the sudden ugliness of life. They were frightened, too, and alight with an anger that could never be a weapon really to be feared in her hands. It struck him in her voice then, but had no real sting to make him wince.

"I know how beautiful I am," she said, "but, thank God, it's not for you."

More when she said that than at any moment from the first time he had seen her, he made oath with himself that he would get her then.

He begged her pardon. He knew well the art of apology. Copthorne had never found a better servant. When she shook him from her with revulsion, he retreated some steps from her

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as though, chidden, he were retreating from a master's presence. That beauty she knew of indeed was his mistress then. But it was the woman he meant to have when he closed a door of restraint before his face and disappeared from her from that moment as an importunate lover.

"I ask your pardon," he said. "My feelings got the better of me."

He came to the Saracen's Head as usual, but for two weeks and more did not speak to her again. For another week he was absent altogether from the bar parlour. His lordship was at Coothorne for the first week in September. The house was full for the shooting. The guns were heard all day. Report related that royal folk were in the party. A weight of game went up to London from the station at Cripplehurst.

When Mr. Hart returned again to the Saracen's Head he had little or nothing to say of it. There was a party—bigger, perhaps, than usual. To all inquiries he said no more, but he saw The Rossetti's eyes listening for his information, and with his own, he conveyed to her that information was for her hearing if she cared.

She knew her own beauty. None of them there realized that about her. By some instinctive computation of her psychology he knew that

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knowledge would bring her to him. She came. Scarcely knowing it, she came. She was beside him at one moment when others were not near. He knocked the ash from his cigar, and he said for her hearing:

“There was royalty—the Saturday till Monday—and better-looking besides all the rest of the week.”

It was the women he described to her, the dresses and jewels they wore—a lovely woman this—a handsome woman that—always their beauty and how, in the knowledge of those who stand and wait and see, that beauty served them.

She listened, fascinated with it all; fascinated, though she did not know it, by the minute keenness of his observation, but above all fascinated by the countering consciousness of her own beauty.

He must have been aware of that in his nature. It was in no subtle practice of his mind. But it was neither in his nature nor in her powers of self-analysis to know exactly what it was her beauty meant to her.

There came one day to Wittenden that September an artist, painting the Kentish oak and beech woods in the first sacrificial fires of autumn reds and golds.

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He showed her what her beauty meant.

With a large satchel across his shoulders, strapped under his armpits, Donald Campbell walked one morning into the bar parlour of the Saracen's Head.

He asked for a pint of the ale of the house as one who has fared in most places and knows what is best. The proprietor brought it him in a pewter tankard. He looked into it for the colour of the liquor, raised it, drank it, and then said:

“Where's your Rossetti?”

He was told she was about the rooms in the hotel upstairs.

“My daughter,” said the proprietor; “and for all her looks, she's a good girl in the house. How did you happen to know they call her that? I don't recollect having seen you in Wittenden before.”

It was a simple matter. The name of beauty in a woman, of speed in a horse, of power in a man, and the word of a good wine, all these travel a long way. He had heard of her from his friend the artist who had christened her.

“Tell her,” said Donald Campbell, “there's an artist downstairs drinking ale, who's come ten miles out of his road on his two feet to have a look at her.”

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A jolly note in the voice encounters no denial. Without a word the proprietor went away and left him there to empty his tankard.

He knew how to throw his head back when there was good ale to be swallowed. It was a hot September day, and he had walked those ten miles since breakfast at seven. He drank to the air at the bottom of his tankard like any thirsty man and neither heard nor saw her come in. When he turned round to put his tankard on the counter she was there.

His tankard made no sound as he laid it down.

"Well—my God!" he said slowly. "You are a beauty—aren't you?"

Mr. Hart had said as much in the gallery at Copthorne, but for a reason she knew then in that first moment, this made different hearing. He stood leaning against the bar for a full minute, staring at her in silence, and even then she had some vision of what her beauty meant. She knew it had been waiting for him.

When he said he was going to stay a few days in Wittenden, that he was going to stay there, at the Saracen's Head, when there and then he unstrapped the satchel from his shoulders and flung it on a chair, not waiting to see that it missed its objective and fell to the floor, but

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taking his eyes back to her the moment he had made his aim, she said:

"I'll go and see to a room for you," and went straight away out of the glazed door that swung to after her and left the bar empty.

She passed her father on the stairs. In so casual a voice she told him the gentleman in the bar was wanting a room in the hotel for a few days, that it merely roused in him a calculation based on the common charge of nine and sixpence for bed and breakfast and a speculation as to what meals the visitor would be likely to have in the house.

He found Campbell still leaning against the bar where he had last looked at *The Rossetti* but knew nothing of that passion in some men which through the eye of a moment can see the whole prospect of time and circumstance.

"Well, have you seen our *Rossetti*?" asked the proprietor.

"I've seen her," replied Campbell.

"And will you want all your meals in the hotel?"

"Meals?"

Campbell's eyes came slowly to an acceptance of the proprietor's face. "I shall want porridge for breakfast," he said.

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That very first day he had his lunch in the hotel. She waited on him. The meal was almost in silence. Just his eyes watching her, up and down the room, round the table, then to the door, still holding there when she had gone and closed it between them.

At dinner she waited on him again. Now he held her in conversation, trying to detain her as she moved always towards the door, not in distrust, but feeling in herself an unwanted sense of security once her hand was upon the handle and the turning of it to her will.

He found her timid that evening, almost with an animal's shyness, her big eyes like an animal's too, watching, as it might have been, for any sudden movement of capture to startle her into an unwelcome fear. But they must both have known, even then, that she was his.

He asked about the surrounding country for his painting. She told him of the Chieveley woods, when he said straight out at her—the startling movement she had expected and thought she would have feared:

“There’s a harvest moon to-night.”

“I know,” she said.

“Ever been in woods in moonlight?”

She never had.

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"We'll be there to-night then," he said; "an hour—less, if that's too long. You just tell me where to wait."

To her own amazement she told him, and that evening, after dark, when the bar parlour was filling up and only Mr. Hart sitting with his cigar was wondering where she was, she met him at the top of the wood road that runs beside the belt of pine trees.

They walked in silence for five minutes. The harvest moon was getting up above Wittenden—an invisible hand holding a burning lamp up into the sky, raising it higher and higher every moment out of a strip of cloud as though the better to see the world with the light of it.

He looked at it beyond her face as he walked and saw no more of the light of it than what just touched her cheek. Presently he stopped in front of her. They were facing each other. His voice was extraordinarily quiet.

"I'm going to put my arms all round you," he said. She stood there, understanding that, as he took her to him and when he kissed her lips, her arm was hanging loosely at her side.

"Rossetti!" he said, and she knew that was what her beauty was for.

This was the first day they had met.

The Rossetti

He stayed in Wittenden ten days, and there was not one soul who knew how and when they met, yet only here an hour or there an hour were they separate.

Then one October night in the woods in Chieveley, he told her he was going home, back to the Scotland he was often speaking of, words her heart had known long before he uttered them. He told her more. He told her what her lips and her eyes, even her pulse, had learnt and kept in secret lest it should reach her understanding.

In all those nights and days he had said nothing of marriage. If she had allowed her thoughts to reckon it at all, she had told herself there was no need to talk of binding her. She was in his bond. She was his. The beauty that she knew quite well yet had no common pride of was his. She had kept it for him. There was time enough to talk of marriage. No marriage ceremony with ring and book and steeple bell would make more wonderful this ecstasy they were sharing in an empyrean partnership.

It was not only The Rossetti face she had. There was the pagan in her which, beneath all their soft tenderness, lies deep for love to reach in the faces of the Pre-Raphaelitish women.

She would not need to talk of marriage then

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—thrust back all thought of it in her mind—but in her senses read his silence on that word as surely as without sign or portent an animal knows the approaching presence of death.

When he told her he was married, with children at the knee, for whom there could be no broken home, she listened to what she realized then she had heard so often in her pulses before.

He offered no excuse for his injustice. Outright he gave it her, with the same clear direction as when that first night he had stood before her and told her he was going to take her in his arms.

It was the quietness of her answer, when she said "I knew" in that still voice which surely must have been the voice also of The Rossetti women, it was this that shook him from a courage he had called upon to face it out.

"I knew," she said, and then, after a slow pause, she added: "How am I going to go on living?"

It was not a question seeking for his answer of it. She said it out into the darkness of the night all about her. She gave it in her voice to all the voices of women who have wondered and will continue to wonder how life is to be endured with the departure of love when, by whatever

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contrivance or aid of fate, the man eludes his capture and is gone from them in a wide world.

“ Why, if you knew——” he began.

She realized all that and had no blame for him. She had waited for him. Nothing could have altered it. However it was, she would have taken him when he came. At first, or at last, knowledge made little difference. She saw no fault in him. She loved. But again and again, through all she said: how was she to go on living? She had kept her beauty for him. How was she to go on living without him?

The first thing he had said to her, when he had put down his tankard on the counter of the bar—that “ My God! you are a beauty, aren’t you? ”—it had been like one arriving from the uttermost ends of the earth, having the password to her heart and saying it on the threshold before she flung open the doors and let him in.

And now—how was she to go on living?

He had not sought it like this, had not been aware of that journey from the earth’s ends to find just one woman in the world. Ten miles he had come out of his way, in a curiosity, partly Scotch of his breed, partly the artist of his nature, seeing a sign-post on the road pointing to Witten-den and remembering his friend’s story of “ The

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Rossetti." But it had become his tragedy as well, if not so hurting deep as hers. Life claimed him as well as love. Her claims were all in one.

Out of a despair those reiterated words of hers wrought in him, he found a human cry in himself that flings back a wild echo from the impassable barriers in the confused direction of God.

"Life can't bring us more misery than we can bear!" he called out. "There's some compensating balance somewhere—surely to God there must be some!"

She sat that night, dressed as she was, on her bed with a candle flickering and the faint October wind swinging the curtains to and fro, and up to her lips came one of the old Scotch ballads he had taught her. It was faint as the wind in her voice, and her eyes were flickering like the candle-light as she sang it:

"O had I wist before I kissed
That love had been sae ill to win.
I'd tied my heart with silken twist
And pinned it with a siller pin.

"O waly, waly, but love is bonnie
A little time while it is new!
But it grows old and waxes cold
And fades away like morning dew."

II

THE CROOKED BILLET

THE Crooked Billet stands to-day, much as it has stood for two hundred and fifty years or so, on the edge of one of those Kentish greens where the cottagers gather to be within sight of the cricket on the long Saturday afternoons in summer. The road runs through there from Tunbridge Wells to Rye by Lamberhurst and Northiam. Many are the vehicles that pull up on those Saturday afternoons to watch the ball go thumping down the uneven pitch and see the village slogger smite a catch up into the sun.

The sign of the Crooked Billet—no more than the name painted on a board raised on the summit of a white painted post—stands in front of the house on the green. At the farther corner, the Coach and Horses displays its rival sign and would appear to have removed itself as far as possible from conflicting interests.

The Coach and Horses was the cricketers' house. At five o'clock on those Saturday evenings, the opposing teams retired there for their tea. The club held its meetings there. There, in the tap-room, where there was a small-sized

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bagatelle board, the teams were chosen with all the portentous ceremony of the forming of a cabinet for deciding the issue of world affairs. In the tap-room of the Crooked Billet there was only a board and darts, the board contrived years ago by Dungay, the village carpenter, its divisions marked out with thick iron wire like rays of the rising sun.

Without question the Coach and Horses was the popular house at Akers Green, but the Crooked Billet had one advantage. It had a sitting-room with lace curtains where folks could be given tea. They did a good trade on the road there with their teas when Mr. Rumens had the place. They might have continued to do a good trade and a better with all the motors coming when Mr. Hart took it over. But his wife was a queer sort and got queerer as time went on. It was her drinking did it. Everyone knew that, and, had it been any other than Mr. Hart, people in Akers Green might have been sorry for him. But the proprietor of the Crooked Billet was not popular. He gave himself airs. It was his own place. He had bought it and he let them know it. The Coach and Horses was a tied house and sold a Maidstone beer because it had to. There were possibilities in the Crooked Billet for a man

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who cared to make himself popular and a woman who would pay attention to the teas.

It was not that Mrs. Hart wholly neglected this side of the business. She kept that parlour with its lace curtains spotlessly clean. There were pictures, oleographs, on all the walls. Always there was an aspidistra in a glazed earthenware pot standing on a crochet mat on the table. Sometimes, when it came into her mind, she gave it water. It was not that she deserted that best parlour. On the contrary, she rather regarded it as her sanctum. All those oleographs, different pictures and by different artists, but all portraying the same subject, were her own. She had bought them, but it could not have been with any money that her husband allowed her. He gave her none. It was not safe to trust her with it. They said in Akers Green that she used to smuggle the eggs away from the chickens they had and sell them to buy drink with. Yet it was not that there were any signs of her ever being actually drunk. The only and distressing effect was upon her mind. She got excited and sang songs in a loud voice. No one would go near the place if they heard Mrs. Hart singing. But this occurred very seldom. Mr. Hart kept a close and a hard hand upon her. She was very quiet, very gentle, as a

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rule. There was no question of its ever being necessary for her to be put away.

The greatest damage she did to the business at the Crooked Billet lay in the violent dislikes she took to people who came to the door asking if they could get tea. There was no knowing whom she would take a fancy to, or in whose face, after one sharp glance at them, she would not shut the door, leaving them standing there to knock as they pleased.

One summer Saturday afternoon, when Akers Green was playing Flishinghurst their return match, a small car drew up on the road behind the Flishinghurst brake and all the spring carts that had collected there to see John Chapman, the shoe-smith, facing the bowling.

It was close upon tea-time, and Akers Green, who were never the same after the interruption of those thick jam sandwiches they give you at the Coach and Horses, were straining every muscle and nerve to come within some approach of the Flishinghurst score before the interval, lest the *débâcle* should follow after.

Flishinghurst had made forty-two. On their own ground they had won the first match of the season. Then they had made fifty-three, but they had a better pitch at Flishinghurst, and such big

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scores were not uncommon there. Forty-two was a big score at Akers Green. It needed all the Green knew of cricket and the idiosyncrasies of their own ground to defeat it.

Donald Campbell, occupant with his eldest daughter of the small car, was informed by a bystander of the issues that were at stake.

"They beat us last year," the villager informed him. "Both matches they beat us—home and away—and they got the first match this year by eight runs. But they've got a young gentleman playing for them this time—him bowling—lives in Flishin'hurst, they say, but I don't know myself. Flishin'hurst ain't as big a place as all that. That's John Chapman with the bat this end. Match here last Saturday, he hit a ball into the horse-pond, other end of the Green there. Plumb in he hit it, without a bounce. There ought to be six for a ball hit like that. Only four they give it."

His voice suddenly lifted in a wild yell. A ball had kicked out of a hole on the pitch and hung up in the air for John Chapman to hit it, and John Chapman had smitten at it with his bat in much the same manner as he wielded his hammer in the forge, and in his black trousers and one white pad—the property of the club—

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he was rushing down the pitch with a stentorian “Come on!” that lifted excitement to a pitch of almost unbearable intensity. One run—two—three! The Flushingurst man who had fielded it could not throw a long ball. Some of the crowd on the Green knew his weakness in this direction and informed the players of it with one voice.

“One for the throw! He ain’t man enough to throw that far! One for the throw!”

And that was four runs off one stroke. John Chapman was racing down the pitch with his bat stretched out, racing for his life and the honour of the Green, with his one pad held at the ankle and flapping loose from the knee.

“Knew that strap’ud go one of these days!” the villager shouted at Campbell. “He won’t get in, that he won’t. Damn that bloody pad! Ah!”

The backer-up had thrown at the wicket, like Jove hurling a thunderbolt. It was hit or miss. No wicket-keeper even with a pair of gloves and two pads could have faced that shot. It missed, and went bounding away into the long field as far on the leg side as John Chapman had hit it on the off.

“Overthrow!” the crowd yelled. “Overthrow! Go on, John! Go on! Never mind the bloody pad! Go on!”

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Like a racehorse pulling itself up at a fence, John Chapman recovered from his effort to reach the crease. With his flapping pad, he started back down the pitch again. Five runs! And there was another. But here the opinion of the crowd wavered. Some shouted to him to stop where he was. Some yelled to him to go on. Stamping with excitement, the villager realized that if he got back he would still have the bowling, and a man who could hit a ball plumb into the horse-pond ought to have the bowling.

"And another, John!" he roared, and down the pitch, with the bowling in his eye, John careered again. Donald Campbell stood up and shouted for Akers Green, which he had never heard of before, and for John Chapman, who was as much a stranger to him as the Lama of Thibet.

There was time to do it. There was time beyond all doubt. But that bloody pad! With all the strain that had been put upon the ankle strap, it was now flapping to the ground. Half-way down the pitch John Chapman's foot trod upon it. With a wild effort to save himself, he staggered three falling steps and measured his length on the grass. The wicket-keeper clicked off the bails and with a voice of thunder cried out to heaven: "How's that?"

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It was the interval for tea. Campbell turned to his informant.

"I must see some more of this," he said.
"Where can I get tea?"

"Teams have it at the Coach and Horses," said the villager; and with less confidence he added: "Then there's the Crooked Billet."

"What's the matter with the Crooked Billet?"

"Nothing the matter—if you can get it there. She won't always serve it."

"Who won't?"

"Wife of the man has the house. You can knock at the door and try, for there won't be much room at the Coach."

Campbell drove his car up on to the grass and left it there.

"You don't mind stopping a few minutes after tea, do you?"

Knowing her father and loving the enthusiasms that kept him young despite his grey hair, she laughed, shook her head and took his arm, and together they walked across the green to the Crooked Billet, saying, "Poor John Chapman!"

"And that bloody pad!" said he.

The door of the house was shut. They knocked. There was no bell. For a few moments

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there was no sign of life. They knocked again. The sound of slippered feet within approached the door. It was opened—a gradual opening, very slow, revealing a woman's head with a wild shock of grey hair that seemed to fly about her head and hung in wisps about a pair of brown eyes that had no human direction in them, but darted upwards and about, seeking unseen places.

After the first surprise, Campbell asked if they could get some tea. He was standing a little in front of his daughter who, at the sight of that strange figure beyond the door, had shrunk a little behind him.

"We were watching the cricket match," said Campbell. "They've all gone to tea over at the Coach and Horses. Can you——?"

"I'm Mrs. Hart," she said, in a voice that might have had some peculiar dignity if there had been any sense in saying what she did.

"I'm Mrs. Hart," she repeated. "I can't give you any tea," and she was about to close the door in Campbell's face when, with curiosity overriding her repugnance, his daughter stood out from behind him to catch a last glimpse of her.

Instantaneously Mrs. Hart held her hand. The door was not closed. The suspicion, the moroseness that was in her face, gave sudden way

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to a suffusing surprise of joy. She beamed with the delight of a child at the sight of a pretty thing. Her mouth twisted with a smile of extraordinarily naïve simplicity, yet, as though some trouble might come to her from it, she hid it behind a secretive hand.

"I can give you some tea," she said, as though she had never said anything to the contrary. She held the door open wide for them to enter. "Poor Mrs. Hart!" she said with an infinite pathos. "She thought she couldn't give you any tea." Her face lit up with smiles again, and her eyes shot away into those strange places where she seemed to find a secret joy as she added: "But she can—she can give you tea—the best china tea sent to me every week, all the way from London."

Campbell turned and looked at his daughter. She was in two minds and, between one and the other, inclined towards going away. With an expression, partly grimace that said plainly enough, "She's harmless and may be amusing," he detained her. They went in. Mrs. Hart sailed before them. Her progression could not be described otherwise. It was not a mere walk. The gestures of her arms, her hands, and her head as she moved were like those of a child dancing.

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Being a middle-aged woman with grey hair, they gave her a suggestion of floating, of being carried along as she walked.

They followed her, wondering, into the parlour, and sat down at the table which filled the centre of the room.

“ We only want tea and bread and butter—cakes if you——”

Campbell stopped. The proprietress of the Crooked Billet was gazing at his daughter with a look of ecstatic adoration. It was difficult to know quite what to do. The poor girl was embarrassed. She tried to return the look. Her eyes fell and turned to her father for refuge. Mrs. Hart’s gaze was more than friendly. It was worshipful.

“ Ah, look! ” she said reproachfully. “ She’s shy! I’ve made her shy with the loving way I looked at her. But she’s so lovely—oh, she’s so beautiful—aren’t you, my dear? And Mrs. Hart made you shy with the rude way she stared at you! Naughty Mrs. Hart! Naughty Mrs. Hart! ”

She scolded herself mercilessly with the sudden severity of her eyes, and as swiftly her expression changed to fear—fear as though she had been struck, as though a sharp hand of

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punishment had fallen upon her. All in one moment as they watched her, these expressions sped in rapid succession across her face and gave way to pain, the pain of a blow. She winced with a little cry and drew away. Then it was all past. A voice was calling her. Not a voice they heard, a voice they saw arresting the changing lights in her eyes. For an instant she listened, looking at some lost angle past their heads into an immeasurable distance. She lifted her forefinger.

"'Ssh!" she whispered, and then she ran to the door and opened it. Whatever that voice may have been, apparently it called her to her senses. In a normal voice, as she stood there with her back to them, she said: "China tea and bread and butter, and cakes if you have any," so that though he had not finished his sentence it was obvious she had realized what he had intended to say.

Having said that, she straightened herself, opened the door wide, threw her head back, and with a sweeping dignity walked out of the room. They were just looking at each other in astonishment when the door opened once more, a few inches only, just wide enough to reveal her face. It was suffused with a childish glee. With her finger up to her lips as one who preserved a solemn secret, with her eyes turned to that same

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sharp angle, and in a lively whisper of her voice, she said:

“ Mrs. Hart has some cakes. She made them for herself, but you shall have them all. Yes, you shall—yes, you shall!” quickly, petulantly almost, as if they had refused to be beholden to her. And then, dropping suddenly to that plaintive note: “ Poor Mrs. Hart! ” she said. The door closed again, and she was gone.

For a few moments they sat with their eyes on the door, expecting any moment it would open once more. But this time apparently she was really attending to the duties of the occasion. In the distance of the house they heard a kettle being moved on the hob, the faint clatter of cups and saucers. Campbell turned to his daughter.

“ What d’you think of that, Lucy? ” he asked.

“ I was frightened at first.”

“ Nothing to be frightened about.”

“ No—I feel sorry for her now. The way she says ‘ Poor Mrs. Hart! ’ Do you think someone’s been cruel to her? That time when she said ‘ Naughty Mrs. Hart! ’ just as if someone were scolding her, and then winced with that little cry. It really seemed as if she felt the pain of a person hitting her.”

“ Yes; and that sudden look to a corner of the

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ceiling—did you notice that?—as if she'd heard a voice calling.”

“ Yes; I saw. Why, I even looked up where she was looking. There was nothing. She's mad—is she ? ”

“ Must be—quite harmless, or they wouldn't let her attend to customers like this. I suppose we shall get some tea. She won't bring in empty plates and tell us there's bread and butter on them.”

“ Should we have to pretend to eat it if she did ? ”

“ I'm afraid we should.”

They laughed. It was in the nature of an adventure, to come out of that July sunshine, where everything and everyone were so real and normal, into this curtained parlour, this still, silent house and find this strange creature, apparently the sole occupant in possession, yet no more in possession than she was in possession of her wits. As for being an occupant of the house, her eyes were sufficient warrant to know that she was leagues away in that world of strange places where her scattered wits were wandering.

“ D'you notice these pictures round the walls ? ” said Campbell presently. She looked. There were eight of them in all—very ordinary

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pictures—nothing to attract attention so far as she could see. What about them ?

“ Don’t you notice anything peculiar ? ”

She shook her head.

“ All the same subject.”

In a sense that was true. Parting, or parted—any one of them might have been called that. A woman and a man saying farewell ; or the desolation of a woman alone, her lover gone. A trite subject for the class of artist that had painted them. The most pretentious amongst them was a Marcus Stone.

“ Do you think that has anything to do with it ? ” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. It was noticeable they were all the same—that was all. She was a married woman. There was no reason to suppose she was disappointed.

She looked presently at her father with that questing glance that is more often in faces younger than was hers.

“ What d’you think it’s like, being mad ? ” she asked.

He sat there, thinking and shaking his head, and then he said :

“ The infinite mercy, perhaps. Think of the

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agony of a mind, bruised and stumbling, dragging itself to the door of oblivion, the one terrible wrench of the bolts, and then—that—”

“That what?”

“What we’ve just seen—the wayward look in the eyes, wandering in happy places—”

“But her cry, and those looks of fear and pain?”

“Confused moments of distant memory. That was all. The voice called her away from them. She’s happier where she is.”

“Do you think it ’ud be awful, then, if she suddenly became sane and remembered everything?”

“Terrible!” he said. He said it again: “Terrible!”

They sat in silence till the door opened. Mrs. Hart brought in the tea. The bread and butter was beautifully cut. The cakes were appetizingly brown. There was a dish of plum jam, certainly home-made. The milk was thick with cream.

She placed it in front of Lucy, and her hand lingered to touch her hand as she put it out for the teapot. She shrank away the moment she had done it, as though a reproving hand had checked her.

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"Naughty Mrs. Hart!" she whispered, and she almost ran to the door. Whatever it was pursued her there as swiftly ceased pursuit. She turned and came back to the table, standing there with her look of amorous worship, her tousled grey head poised on one side, her funny mouth pursed for kisses, and her wandering eyes arrested in adoration.

"You dear lovely!" she said.

She appealed to Campbell, but her eyes never settled upon him. They shot past his head to that high corner of the ceiling.

"Isn't she lovely?" she said.

"She is," Campbell replied. "I'm proud of her. She's my daughter."

That seemed to mean nothing to Mrs. Hart. She just swung her head to the other side and looked at Lucy again and clasped her hands in an ecstasy.

"Have you any children?" Campbell asked her.

"Oh, yes," she said, and wagged her head and laughed with little sounds at her lips. "Sweet—sweet children." She shut her eyes and saw them.

"Are they at home? Where are they?"

With a childish mischievousness, she

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wagged her head again and with her finger touched her forehead.

“Happy where they are!” she whispered.
“Happy where they are!”

“Do you mean they’ve never been born?”

She frowned and shook her head warningly at him. That was her secret. Who might not hear him if he spoke so loudly? She turned again to run away, but it was gone from her mind before she had opened the door. Back she came once more to the table.

“I was beautiful once,” she whispered. “I was beautiful like her. Dear lovely—dear lovely! Born too soon I was—that’s why——” She never finished that explanation. Her sentence broke. She was suddenly consumed with a consciousness that they were strangers, visitors only, and that the room had never been prepared for them.

“It’s not a fit tea to give anyone!” she exclaimed. “And all the room untidy.” With a gesture of self-recrimination she pulled a leaf of the aspidistra with disgust. “Dirty old green raggetty!” she cried, and turned and ran out of the room.

In less than five minutes she was back again, querulously, like a child expecting rebuke, peeping her head in at the door, arching her eyes with

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silent questions, leering at them, frowning at them, smiling at them, creeping stealthily into the room and closing the door softly behind her, as though the house were full of those listening to hear whether she were annoying the visitors in the parlour.

It was the fresh beauty and the youth of Campbell's daughter that lured her like a candle flame luring a moth. Back again and again she came while they ate their tea. She would stand with hungry eyes feasting on Lucy's face, saying nothing in an embarrassing adoration, but smiling and thrusting out her face sometimes as one who would kiss or be kissed. Sometimes she murmured, "Dear lovely—dear lovely!" and then apologize for her presence, saying they did not want an old woman like her interfering with them eating their tea.

She shook her head sadly when they said she might stay as long as she liked.

"No—no," she said, and edged sideways to the door again. "You don't want Mrs. Hart—poor Mrs. Hart!"

It seemed as if this were another departure, when back she came with mincing steps to the table, leaning over it towards Lucy and catching her hand and pressing it to her lips.

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“ Dear lovely—dear lovely! ” she whispered, and then suddenly her voice turned to singing, strange singing, deep in her throat like a man’s falsetto and wavering timidly upon the tune.

“ O had I wist before I kissed
That love had been sae ill to win—”

Her voice faltered. Tune and words both left her. She dropped Lucy’s hand and turned away, muttering sadly, to the door. That slender memory she had, bringing its messages in faint fragments out of the hidden past, had deserted her. Her wits had scattered again like a flock of birds. With her back turned she was crying softly at the winnowing sound of those wings of memory, flying away, always flying away just when they had settled.

“ O had I wist before I kissed
That love had been sae ill to win—”

Lucy was singing it for her, and Campbell’s eyes set suddenly with watching were fixed upon that figure at the doorway which, at the sound of the young voice certain of its notes, was held with listening. When swiftly she turned round, her withered face was aglow with some suffusing joy. She lifted her hand. Her eyes roamed listening

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about the room, and then, in a trembling alto, she joined in with a tuneless second:

“ O waly, waly, but love is bonnie
A little time while it is new !
But it grows old and waxes cold
And fades away like morning dew.”

“ Where did you hear that song ? ” asked Campbell slowly.

She gave him no answer but laughter, that fled from her with sudden frightened looks. With his eyes on her, she edged to the door.

“ Where did you hear that song ? ” he asked again.

She put her finger to her lips. It was such a secret. The house was full of listeners. She crept on tiptoe across the room to whisper it to him.

“ Mrs. Hart was beautiful once,” she murmured under her breath, and then, peering into his face, she grinned at him. “ Poor Mrs. Hart —look at poor Mrs. Hart ! ” She tossed her grey hair about with her fingers. “ She was born too soon. Do you know what they called her ? Silly, wasn’t it, when you look at her with her scraggled face ? Silly ! Silly ! ”

“ What did they call her ? ”

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She shook her head mischievously at him, her eyes twinkled with a childish glee. Why should she tell her secret? He could not take her secret from her. She was too clever, too cunning and too mischievous for that. With a toss of her head she was turning to the door.

“What did they call her?” he repeated.

She looked around. His voice had held her. In obedience to his look she came like a chidden child to his side and whispered something in his ear. Then, with her forefinger to her lips, she tiptoed out of the room.

“What did she say?” said Lucy.

He shook his head.

“Do you mean she didn’t say anything?”

He did not answer.

For a few moments his eye never left the door, and then, in a hard voice, he asked her if she had finished her tea. She could not understand. She nodded her head. He stood up quickly and put some money on the table. It was enough for their tea. She saw it was more than enough.

Then he walked out of the room and out of the house into the sunshine. She followed after him.

The men were playing cricket again on the green.

QUEEN BEE

THE Strand was crowded. It was a Saturday afternoon. It would defy anyone to say from what parts of London all those young men and young women come who parade up and down the Strand on Saturday afternoon and on through the evening till the theatres close.

From two till half-past five there is a certain selectness about them. They would appear to be young clerks of both sexes in more or less superior positions. Young men out of haberdashers' shops display their employers' fashions in ties and socks and shirts; young men out of hat shops don their employers' hats. They mingle with actors and actresses from the Bodega in Bedford Street, Rule's in Maiden Lane, and all those theatrical agencies that cluster together in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden.

There is a leaven, too, of those elegant folk who go to the matinées of the theatres. They may not here be quite so elegant as those who are thus bent on pleasure farther West, for all entertainers cater for those who walk in their own particular

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street, but their presence is to be felt, giving the Strand an air of refinement from two till half-past five.

After the theatres are over, and until the tea-shops have begun to shut their doors and put up their shutters, this superior note lingers in the voices of all those who promenade the Strand on a Saturday afternoon. After that hour—an arbitrary one so far as the tea-shops are concerned—the note gradually changes. Here and there you begin to catch the heavy sound of an aspirate falling. Here and there, with the uncultured manners of those who do not know what really belongs to them, you see others stooping to pick it up.

By eight o'clock, when the heavy-horse-powered cars are turning into the Savoy with their electric lights burning inside to give the less fortunate pedestrian an opportunity of seeing the ease and opulence of those within, when, in fact, only those are on foot whose necessity compels them, the whole tone of the Strand is altered. The West has gone out of it. The East has come in. It is like a tide turning, and inevitably every Saturday it turns that way. The Strand is the promenade of London—from Wellington Street to Charing Cross.

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This that happened, happened on a Saturday afternoon in the full glare of spring sunshine. One or two taxis, crawling along by the kerb-stone like dogs looking in the gutter for a bone, had put down their hoods to tempt a passing fare. There was a sunblind over Appenrodt's window to protect the hams within. Down Villiers Street and Surrey Street the river glittered between the houses. The first straw hats had elbowed their way into the hatters' windows, though none had actually ventured into the street. Tennis shoes had stepped down into the midst of the boot-makers' display of footwear. There were many who stopped and looked at them; to whom, for a moment, at the sight of those pipe-clayed toes, the Strand, with all its traffic and its noise, became a suburban recreation ground in mid-summer with the sound of soft tennis-balls striking on loose-strung bats. And when a paper man called out the six o'clock edition of the evening papers, it may well to them have sounded like the cry of "Fif all!" or "Van in!"

He was a clerk in a solicitor's office down Norfolk Street, and she was something—it would not be easy to say what—in the book department of a literary agency near by.

They had met as young people do meet in

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the Strand, for there is an air of propriety and security about that thoroughfare which is different from any other street in London. A girl will admit the friendly advances of a young man in the Strand, when she would keep a rigid head and an unconscious air anywhere west of Charing Cross.

It is perhaps because, every day of the week, the Strand is a busy place. People do work there. They don't philander as they do in Conduit and Maddox Streets. A young man in the Strand, with a smile in his eye, is not necessarily giving it promiscuously to every girl he meets. He is about his business, and a smile in his eye must jump there, so to speak, out of a crowd of other mental occupations. He does not wear it like a coloured silk handkerchief peeping out of his breast pocket, or like a chamois glove unbuttoned at the wrist.

It had only required one quick, casual meeting for that smile to be seen; another as quick and casual for it to be admitted; and yet a third, not quite so quick, and probably intentioned on his part, for it to be transmitted from eye to lip and there to be responded to by that swift downward or sideward glance that has no smile in it till it has well removed itself from all charge of direct encouragement.

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This stage having been reached in three encounters and both by this time knowing where the other is employed—such knowledge, of course, proving satisfactory—the whole affair takes another and more dramatic turn.

She came out to lunch at half-past one, because the sublimely mannered gentleman, whose letters she took when he was not in friendly converse with only the leading authors of the day, never returned from his luncheon till half-past two. In times of social pressure where business was attached, he might not return till three or four.

Two days afterwards the third phase had been passed. As she came out of the building to lunch, she saw him on the other side of the street. Solicitors are prosaic firms. They have their meals at regular and expected hours. He must have waited there since one o'clock. To have done that he must have known what hour she came out. She was under observation; not the mere casual observation of chance, but that first discovery of the trail, a sensation as when you feel someone is following you in a wood. It is more than that, for it goes back to primitive and not merely the neurotic emotions of hyper-civilization. It is as exciting as a chase, but a

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chase where the conscious instinct to escape is only contributory to the subconscious instinct of the need to be caught. That is the thrill of it. It has a quicker pulse than fear.

There are some women, a very few, who would have turned back into the building—forgetting their handkerchief, having left their purse behind, for reasons as well as other things are a woman's prerogative—a few would have done this rather than face pursuit. She was not one of these.

Only a few days before she had accepted that challenge of the smiling lip. If the trail had been taken up, the pursuit begun, she was ready to acknowledge it. But just waiting on the other side of the street was not enough to catch her. He must be fleeter of foot, longer of wind, surer of purpose than that to win.

The Queen Bee flits into the zenith of blue heaven before her mate can claim her, and one only there is amongst her thousand followers who can survive the chase. Nature selects her fittest with a ruthless hand.

One glance she gave across the street, and then hurried up into the Strand.

There is a kind of walk in such affairs as these which comes to a woman by instinct. No one ever taught it to her. She uses it at no other

Queen Bee

time. If judged by the pace of the steps she takes it would be said to be swift; but the length of those steps is so inconsistent with speed that it does not ensure complete escape. It is not meant to. It gives two impressions, the impressions it is intended to give ; and to a young man only just entering upon adventure in these alluring fields of pursuit it gives them most effectively.

Her walk conveyed to him that afternoon the impression that she was offended at his waiting there for her in the street. But that was not quite all, and, though his mind was not subtle enough to grasp it, there was as well this qualification—that she was offended because it was that particular street upon which the window of her office looked with ever-inquisitive eyes.

If it is possible to get all that into the mere movement of one's legs and the planting of one's feet down upon a pavement, a woman can do it. She did it that afternoon.

The other impression was subtler still. It was that she was in no mood for dalliance, but that if he walked as fast as she, there was nothing short of an earthquake to prevent him from seeing where she had her lunch, though the walk by no means guaranteed that she would lunch there the next day, and it emphatically declared she

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did not offer this as any opportunity for conversation.

Turning up into the Strand and making her way to the nearest A.B.C. shop, she walked like that.

And it was all as her walk predicted. He kept her in sight the whole way ; and when he came into the shop, there she was seated at a table with three other people, and there was no getting near her at all.

There are many tests. The first is perseverance. He survived that and they met at last. She chose a vacant table in one of the many lunching places she had led him to, and thereby signified her first capitulation. When he sat down on the other side, she tried to stifle her laugh with a large piece of roll and butter, but it was not really meant to be effective.

When he said, " You've led me a nice dance, haven't you ? " she approved of his honesty in attack, and gave him the laughter in her eyes with a frank admission that that was introduction enough.

What they talked about during that luncheon hour might not have contributed to the unsolved problems of life, yet it was all a part of the pursuit, part of the escape. Little approaches to-

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wards intimacy on his part, little evasions on hers. She knew a great deal about him by the time they stood up from that table. He knew very little about her. She was still in full flight above him. But he was not one of those yet to fall away.

He invited her to have tea with him that Saturday afternoon in a certain tea-shop on an upper floor where, if she did not know it she would soon find out, the tables are all partitioned off from each other by discreet and protective screens, and voices, if lowered at all, are lost in the noise of traffic outside.

It was one of those places which does credit to the ingenuity of the mind that conceived it. There is nothing improper about them, and you will find them all over London. They are designed for just that phase of the pursuit when the distant quarry has loomed in sight, when you are close enough to see the quick blush on her cheek and dare not comment upon it, the bright laugh in her eye and venture to laugh with it, the rather sweet parting of her lips and must not look at them too long for fear they might close and be parted for you no more.

He saw her quick look about the room when they entered. There was no sharing a table with

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others here. She was to have him entirely to herself behind one of those Japanese screens.

A certain flexibility seemed to leave her just as it would have done had they been at a dance and he had chosen some very secluded place for their sitting out.

A quick eye observed that for him, but there was not the experience behind it to read its meaning clear. He thought she was frightened, uncertain of herself and him. It brought him a dominant sense of proprietorship. In many little ways he began to swagger. She might not know it, but she was quite safe with him. He had all the instincts of a gentleman. She would learn that, perhaps to her surprise, certainly to her gratification, as their acquaintance progressed.

She noticed all his little swaggerings, the tone of voice with which he addressed the waitress, the way he threw his hat on to a vacant chair and sat down, hitching his trousers and showing socks she would readily have admitted she thought were in good taste.

It was not because she noticed them that she objected to these little swaggerings. That was not against him. She would have been the first to concede that life demanded certain postures of the mind to make it effective. If he only knew it,

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she was swaggering herself, swaggering when she asked if she might have China tea, when he had just said, "Tea for two, please," swaggering when she thought she would like to take off her coat because it had just been re-lined with a material of her most careful selection and looked newer inside than it did out.

The essential quality of swagger was that it should succeed. She had no pity, but contempt only, for swagger that failed. In a sense it was swagger of his to bring her to a place like that. It gave the impression that he knew his way about—always an effective impression to give; for though it argued that he had been there in similar circumstances before, that she was not the first, it was not really that she expected or wanted to be that.

What she needed in her sense of romance was really to be the last, coming with all that glamour of the first and only woman in a man's life. She was not sorry to realize that he had been there before; yet even here she put him to the test, the swifter upward speed of flight which, if he were not prepared to meet it, might carry her up and away beyond his range.

"I wonder how often you come here?" she said, serenely sipping her China tea, with little finger delicately lifted in the air.

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He sensed a trap, but far less subtle a one than she had laid for him. She thought he was a flighty young man, whereas in the whole of that office in Norfolk Street, even to Mr. Barber, the chief clerk, he knew there was none who took life as seriously as he did. Mr. Barber never read poetry. He read the law reports and went to cinemas.

"What d'you mean—how often?" he asked.

"Well, it's easily seen you know your way about," she replied.

Swiftly he repudiated that insinuation. He admitted to one other visit to those tea-rooms, but in that tone of voice as though it might well have been his sister who had accompanied him. He was not that type. It was not because they had made acquaintance in the street—well, they had; that first smile had been the beginning of it—it was not because of that she had any right to think him a gadabout.

And all this disappointed her—if it was true. She made due allowance, however, for elasticity on so short an acquaintance, and this saved him in her eyes for the moment.

It did not save him for long. She must have suspected him then of no great spirit, though it was to be admitted he came proudly to the pur-

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suit. By the time the China tea was brought—for in an instant he had discovered a preference for that particular blend—they were talking with the line of intimacy narrowly between them. At every effort of his to draw her over, he found he lost ground.

At last, when there was no more hot water and the milk had run out, he achieved an advantage.

“Do you know why I first noticed you in Norfolk Street?” he asked, and that intrigued her curiosity. There is no mirror that will give a woman that first impression to a stranger—the impression she creates just as she walks along the street. He was offering that reflection. She had not been human if she had not wanted to look.

“You looked as if you were the last girl on earth who would ever allow anyone to speak to you.”

She hoped, as many another girl in similar circumstances, that she was.

“Why did you speak to me, then?” she asked.

“Because that made me want to terrifically.”

It was when she asked, “Is that all?” that she lost most of the ground she had gained.

He told her then, in a voice the sound of a

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bicycle bell outside in the Strand would have drowned, that if that did not satisfy her and she really wanted the truth, it was because getting to know her was the only method he knew of getting to kiss her, and in his opinion to kiss her was the nearest thing he could imagine to that joy they talked about in the world to come.

She resisted the inclination to laugh. To have laughed just then would have revealed the tentative pleasure that she felt, and, having seen a couple behind one of the Japanese screens who, if they were not kissing were certainly wasting their time, she said: "It's time I went for my train at Charing Cross."

He looked at her for a moment, wondering, but she kept her glance averted with the occupation of putting on her gloves. He lost immeasurably in her estimation when he paid the bill. If ever a girl had asked to be kissed, she knew she had. Had he pursued her with that speed, as when he told her that to kiss her was equal to that joy they talked about in heaven, she would have submitted. And having been kissed by him, she might have discovered that she liked it. Now he had thrown his chance away, and when they came down into the open sunlight of the Strand she laughed.

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He asked her what she was laughing at.

"I was laughing then," she said, "because I'd wanted to laugh before, only I didn't think it was wise."

"What d'you mean—wise?"

"You might have kissed me."

"Do you mean to say you wanted me to?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You never know," she said, "till you've tried."

He drove his hands deep into his pockets.

"I've a good mind to kiss you here, now, in the Strand!" he exclaimed.

She looked up at him with her eyes and her lips laughing.

"You wouldn't dare to," she said.

"Wouldn't I?"

"No."

Their eyes met straight. There was half a pause in his walk at which her heart sank, and she felt the edge of her forehead cold.

He laughed foolishly.

"Yes," he said, "I know—and then you'd smack my face," and his step quickened again.

That was his last chance. It was quite true, she might have smacked his face, but it would have been her first embrace. She had dared him

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and he would have dared. He had not dared, and in that instant he fell away from her in his flight. He dropped to earth and she soared away into the zenith, untouched, uncaptured.

When she said good-bye at Charing Cross he could hear quite plainly it was—good-bye.

A COCK OF THE HAT

APPEARANCES with women—with men for that matter—are so deceptive that if you can look no more than once it is almost better you should not look at all.

At first glance, Jane Ledger conveyed every impression of a strong, determined, and independent young woman. She dressed that way, which is an indication not so much of what a woman is, but what she would like to be.

I knew a woman who affected the dark striped skirt, the black tailor-made coat with braid on it, and some contrivance about the neck which strongly resembled a stock. There were even occasions when she wore an eyeglass. And once she ran in panic from No. 13 Onslow Square up into the Cromwell Road before she could find someone to extract a spider that had fallen down her neck.

Jane Ledger had no pretensions to such manfulness, but she did feel there was something independent about her. No doubt there was. She had clear-cut eyebrows, bright eyes, a jaw

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that was finely shaped, but a jaw. And her lips—quite pretty lips—were usually set together, especially in the repose of meditation.

But with all this impression about herself, she overlooked—as most of us do—certain rude principles of life which, if you put yourself in the way of them, can be extremely rude, cruel, and even barbarous.

The independence of Jane Ledger was a genuine thing. Apparently she had not been christened indiscriminately. There was a lot of the plain Jane and a considerable lack of nonsense about her. She did not merely sit at home in her parents' house, altering dresses so as to appear in different costumes at the various dances to which she was invited and talk emphatically about a new generation of women. Nor did she think the vote meant anything unless you had something to vote for.

She had taken up art when she left school. Systematically and conscientiously she had attended art classes, not with any real ambition to become a Laura Knight. She claimed no qualities of genius. But in the new age about her she felt the relation between art and industrialism. She had learnt design, and after eighteen months in the art classes had secured a post of designer in

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one of the big modern furniture and decorating firms in the West End. She did not call herself an artist. This showed her lack of nonsense. From ten in the morning, with an hour for lunch, she worked till six o'clock with other girls similarly occupied, in a vast studio at the top of a high building. It was brightly lighted. There was plenty of air. There was also a good deal of drudgery. Occasionally the work was fascinating. Occasionally it called for genuine originality. Then her spirits were as high as the windows through which she could look down on to the chimney-pots of London.

Taking the good with the bad, it was independence. It allowed scope, with certain restrictions, for strength and determination. She regarded herself in the glass before she went to work each morning, and as good as said to herself: "There you are, young woman; ready for the day—neat, smart. I don't think you're bad-looking. At any rate, you're not dependent on anyone and needn't be till you want to be."

And sometimes she saw in her face a picture, not of what she might have been when she was a child, but of what a child might be if she had one of her own. Whoever its father might be—and in her opinion it would have to be someone

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exceptional—the child did not take after him. She found it to bear a peculiar resemblance to herself.

Seeing that picture, she would stop longer than usual before the mirror and then, as though it had some relation to this flight of her fancy, she would cock her hat either backwards or forwards, a little on this side or a little on that, to give it more of that air which causes people to look before they see: those people might be men. When they saw they might not want to look again. The point was that they should be attracted to look. The rest was in the lap of the gods. With a twist on her heel, showing that she was quite aware of the fortune of the gods and no sycophant, Jane would leave the mirror and go off to her work.

More than one man looked and saw and looked again. A man looking to some effect was Tom Arckell. Captain Thomas Arckell, but he had dropped that since the War. He was an M.C. and a D.S.O. Others had told her that.

She asked him about it.

“When a chap’s been gassed once and wounded four times,” said he, “he wants to forget about it.”

He had a little money of his own. He described it as being just enough to fling about

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with. He had a small two-seater car, and began calling for her after work hours to take her home.

“ Better than those thundering buses,” he said.

Regularly every morning she cocked her hat in the mirror. One morning she thought she saw two children—one, a girl, the dead spit of herself; the other was indistinct, but it was there. She thought it might be a boy and, apart from her eyes and her chin, it had a faint resemblance to Tom Arckell.

This apparition of her fancy recurred on two or three occasions and then disappeared altogether. It disappeared after one evening when Tom Arckell had called to take her home and, instead of going the direct route to Notting Hill, had circled twice round Regent’s Park at a curious pace and, driving with one hand, had tried to take her hand with the other.

“ I think, if you don’t mind,” said she, “ I’d prefer to be taken home than to a hospital.”

She could say things, if needed, with her jaw, her eyebrows, as well as her lips. Without another word he drove her straight to Notting Hill, jumped out of the car, though there was no exit on the driver’s side, and opened the door for her with the air of a footman who has been given a

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month's notice. Not a modern footman. A footman of thirty years ago. These distinctions of metaphor are necessary.

"Aren't you going to say good night?" he asked.

He swayed a little unsteadily as he still held on to the handle of the door.

"Good night," said she, and ran up the steps and shut the hall door firmly behind her.

For a moment her inclination was to run upstairs to her bedroom and cry. On second thoughts, as when she eliminated a particularly personal touch in her designs in the studio because she knew quite well what was expected of her in the saleroom, she hurried into the dining-room and peeped at him through the gauze curtains.

He had pulled up the car with such a jerk that the engine had stopped. There was no self-starter. He had to wind it up from the crank in front of the radiator. He did it, much as a tired Italian turns the handle of his barrel-organ at the end of a long day. When the engine was running he stood swaying slightly in the street, looking up at the windows. With her breath held, she kept in the darkness of the room. If she moved, she felt he might see her.

Her heart was beating. She felt sick in her

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throat. With a peculiar deliberation, as of a man who is walking with a two-foot rule tied to the sole of each foot, he walked all round the car and then got into it. Having closed the door and looked up once more at the windows, he blew the horn three times, though there was no other vehicle in the street. Then he drove away.

After that she went up to her room, and sat down on her bed. Then she did cry. In the morning she looked as usual in the mirror. But there were no children there. She merely saw a woman who, with a line here and a line there, would come in the due course of time to look forty, as all women do.

She did not cock her hat.

This was the beginning of the most painful year in Jane Ledger's life. The two-seater was waiting for her as usual the next evening outside the works entrance. She quickened her steps to the right directly she got out on to the pavement. It was no good. He had the consideration to let her get away from the other girls, and then he was beside her. All the traffic in the street might have stopped to give place to the sound of his footsteps in her ears.

"Aren't you going to let me take you home?"

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She walked on at the same pace. Her mind was racing from him. But he caught it up.

After one or two disjointed questions and answers she said:

“Don’t you realize you had been drinking last evening?”

“Yes.”

His reply was so unequivocal that, being out of range of those who might recognize her, she stopped in the street and looked at him.

“Well?” she said.

The look in her eyes, the hard, questioning line of her eyebrows, the set of her jaw, would have been sufficient for many another man. He would have taken that “Well?” as quite final. It had a surface like marble, polished, and as cold. Tom Arckell took no more notice of it than he did of the mud in Flanders. He looked at her with a child-like expression which later was more terrifying to her than anything else, and he said: “It shan’t happen again.”

A kind of politeness, mixed with respect for his honesty, to which, despite herself and her chin and the set of her lips, was added an ingredient of sympathy, made her ask him coldly why it had happened at all.

“Let me drive you home—just this once,”

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said he, " and I'll tell you. I shall be arrested if I leave the car there much longer with no one to look after it. If I've got to be put in quod, let me be put in quod for what I deserve."

With an effort to conceal her smile, she turned sharply and walked back to the car. Like dogs, men take full absolution from the first sign of grace. He ran like a dog on ahead of her and started up the car. Like a dog, he made no allusion to past misdemeanour. All the way up Regent Street they said nothing. He drove with extraordinary care. When he let a bus push him out of his place in the traffic, she glanced at him sideways.

When they came to Oxford Circus he carried straight on to Upper Regent Street.

" Where are you going ? " she asked quickly.

" Regent's Park."

" No; not again, thank you. We had Regent's Park yesterday."

" I want to talk," said he. " Can't talk driving. I'll pull up in Regent's Park and we'll talk a bit. I want to explain yesterday. There's Quentin Hogg with one ear on what the little boys are saying and one ear on Queen's Hall. Nice open bit, Portland Place." He opened the throttle. " Shan't be a minute now." And in a

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few minutes they were pulled up by the railings beside the Zoological Gardens.

“ Well ? ” she said again.

She was meaning to be hard. She felt all the full possession of her independence. A man who could get drunk when he was coming to meet her ! It was not so much her value of herself as vague thoughts in which every girl has pictures of the married state.

She did not say, “ I am worth better than that.” She said nothing. She just saw things in the dark glimmer of imagination, and shuddered.

“ Well ? ” she repeated.

He turned in his seat and looked straight at her.

“ Did you ever see a man come home who was gassed in the War ? ” he asked. It was not so much his question as the extreme simplicity, like a child’s, in his voice. She shook her head.

“ Ever see a chap with shell-shock being handed in to one of those ambulances that used to line-up down Villiers Street outside Charing Cross ? ”

With less confidence than before, she shook her head again.

“ I know I’m no good,” he went on in a plain voice. “ All the good I ever had—wasn’t much

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—was gassed out of me, blown out of me, in the War. Four years I had of it. There was scarcely a night after the last time I came out of hospital I didn't get tight. You've never been tight?"

She half-smiled.

"Oh! women used to get tight, waiting for men to come back. When you're tight the gas seems to get out of your lungs. You can breathe a bit. The back-fire of a motor-bus doesn't sound like a—what's the good of being technical? —you've never heard 'em. They seem to do it on purpose sometimes. I've gone up to a bus driver and said, 'Blast your bloody eyes!' and then I've gone and got tight as quick as I could."

She shuddered. It sounded terrible—but if that were truth?—it had the sound of truth in it!

"Since I met you," he went on, "I've only been tight that once. There was a collision in Piccadilly—two cars—plump! One of them burst a tyre. It went off like a howitzer. Everybody started running. I ran. Fast as I could lick, straight away from it—right into the Monico, and had a stiff one—then another—so on. Didn't realize I was tight till you said that about being taken to the hospital. I know I'm no good. But I haven't been tight since. And you heard that thunderstorm last night?"

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“ Yes.”

“ Ever heard a machine gun ? ”

“ No.”

“ I’m sober all right now.”

“ Why don’t you get some work to do ? ”

“ What ? What work ? ”

It conveyed everything.

“ What were you doing when you joined up ? ”

“ Translating Virgil—doing a bit of Greek and wondering how the hell I could get out quadratic equations. I’ve got enough money to fling about with. The mater died when I was out there.”

She felt something snap inside her beneath the weight of an insupportable responsibility. In that moment she knew she might be director of the designing department and her independence would be gone.

“ Drive me home,” she said.

She felt as though he had suddenly climbed upon her shoulders and was clinging with his hands on her hat till there was no tilt left in it.

“ Drive me home,” she repeated, and she took her hat off, held it in her lap in front of her, and pushed back the hair from her forehead.

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For six weeks he met her every evening in his two-seater and drove her home. Sometimes they went round the Outer Circle of Regent's Park, but she conveyed to him that this was exceptional.

"Just for a treat," she said and laughed, but it was a laugh that might have shattered with rough usage. By an effort of will, she had cased herself behind some transparent barrier where he might see but could not touch her. Somehow, he seemed to accept this condition of affairs, and spoke no more of his feelings than that he wanted to be with her. He loved her, then. She knew that. She knew also that he was afraid to tell her so, lest he should frighten her away. She gave little but her companionship and the sympathy you give to a dog that has hurt its paw, and knew he felt forced to be content with that. So she felt like a lioness in a cage. His weakness, his dependence, the mere fact of his existence—flotsam drifted out of the spate of the War—all this imprisoned her. But he dared not venture his hand between the bars. If he had robbed her of her independence, he dared not touch, tease, or caress.

They asked her at home if she were going to marry him.

"No," said she.

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"Then why not tell him to sheer off?" said her brother. "He's only got a bit of money. He hasn't got anything else."

"That's just it," she said. "He hasn't got anything else."

She tried to persuade him to go abroad.

"This country's finished for men," said she, "who used to be men. I see them in the sale-rooms—men who've fought like you have, spreading out a piece of curtain material and saying, 'That ought to look extremely well with your wallpaper, madam,'—and you can't help thinking of the times they handled sandbags and said things to Germans that'd bleach the material they have in their fingers. Any country's finished for men once women begin to squeeze in."

That seemed to sting him. He went to Australia House and came away with pockets full of pamphlets. He even talked of buying his passage. She saw her independence again like daylight in a dark room through the chink of a shelter. But he did not go.

Then one night he took her out to dinner. He was lavish in his generosity. Continually she had to prevent him from buying her presents. He ordered champagne. She had no idea of what

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men drank at a meal. She had less of what they might have consumed before.

When they came out into the open air, she saw him swaying from one angle to another as he stood beside her on the pavement.

"Get a taxi," she said sharply.

He tried to whistle. It was like water in a piccolo. A driver saw his gesture and pulled up alongside the kerbstone.

"Give him the address," she said. "I'm going home."

He gave the address.

"Say it again," said the driver.

He said it again, and then, before she had expected it, he had entered the cab, closed the door behind him, lurched into the seat beside her, and they were out in the swirl of the theatre traffic.

"I thought we were going to a show?" he said.

"No; I prefer to go home."

"Why?"

He looked at her eyes once and waited for no other answer. His own shifted to the floor of the cab, and for awhile they sat without speaking. But that did not suit her. She was not one to wrap herself in a cloak of silence and slip away

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through curtains when no one was looking. That was not the meaning of her chin or the set of her lips. She preferred a door, plainly opened, cleanly and irretrievably shut. This is a luxury. A good many of us would like that. So few doors shut properly. Some not at all.

She opened her door then with a plain statement.

"I don't want you to call for me any more and take me home," she said.

The moment she had said it she was afraid. One would have thought it a simple thing to say. They were not engaged. There was no pledge broken. She tried to tell herself it was merely the discontinuation of a foolish habit, but was conscious of his crumpling up beside her on the seat of the taxi. It was as though the bones in his body had all been broken, as they broke the bones in the bodies of the crucified thieves. With a slight turn of her head she glanced down at him in a sickness of apprehension. It was as though, physically, she felt his dead weight crushing the life, the freedom, and all purpose out of her body. With the effort of a question she tried to raise him from her.

"Oh, come on!" she said. "There's no need to take it like that. What's the matter with you?"

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"That's the end of me," he muttered.

"Oh, nonsense! You're really only wasting your time, giving up evening after evening to come and meet me. It isn't a man's life."

She said that for his sake, but was quite aware of the injustice of it. In four years he had crowded into his life enough manliness to fill the lives of six men in times of peace. This, that lay crumpled up beside her, was what remained. She had seen the motor ambulances waiting down Villiers Street. One day—she was seventeen—after her art class was over, she had seen them. It had been a lie when she shook her head. She *had* seen them streaming out of Charing Cross with those still figures lying in them like carcasses from the shambles. She remembered quite well what she felt then, the surge of pity, the flood of gratitude. Was this all that was left of it? Were the rank and file and the men who had borne the brunt always to be forgotten? Was it the true fitness of things that just a leader here and a leader there who had been favoured with victory should remain in the memory? A Nelson amongst the people in Trafalgar Square? A Wellington where the fashionable folk drive by into Hyde Park?

She felt him leaning against her, and it was like the weight of an unendurable sense of

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justice that lay, crushing all the spirit of her freedom.

"Why can't you do something in the way of a motor-car business?" she suggested. "You have the money to start. You're interested in cars. Somewhere just out of London, where life's not so infernally noisy. Why can't you do that?"

"If you take yourself away from me," he moaned, "I'm done for. That finishes me. I just go under. And I shall finish myself before that happens. Haven't forgotten how a trigger's pulled. Not yet!"

She was too overwhelmed by the horror of it to appreciate the cruelty, too. A life was a life to her. She had not seen men too badly wounded left in the mud of a shell-hole. She was unaware of that rude principle of life. All it presented to her was another rude principle annihilating her independence. A smitten man can find his only strength in a woman. Some of them without being smitten could find that. They had to take their chance. But this one—hadn't he earned all that a woman could give him?

A weakness of spirit seized upon her. She did not know which way to turn. Had she given it one moment's consideration she would never have said what she did. It was the terror of seeing

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him shot at last—shot, bleeding, dead, years after the War was over. It would be like a fate that had steadily tracked him down. Five times he had been wounded, had recovered and been sent back. She was sending him back for the sixth time to certain destruction. In the last hope that there was some way out, she said:

“ But how can I possibly mean all that to you, just meeting me in the evening, taking me home, going out to a theatre sometimes? It’s silly! You haven’t got all your senses about you, or you couldn’t help seeing how silly it is. A man’s life doesn’t depend on a thing like that.”

The moment she had said it she sensed the weakness, the folly, the mistake of it. His body stiffened beside hers. It seemed to stiffen with a galvanic force that had entered it. He sat up in the taxi staring at her.

“ My life depends on it,” he said slowly. “ Haven’t you known these last six weeks that I love you, every look in your eyes, every word you say, everything you do? When you come out of that works door it’s like life coming out of somewhere to a sick man. I feel invigorated. I’ve said nothing, because I didn’t want to put you off. I’ve been contented with the little you’ve let me have. You’ve asked now. And that’s it.

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That's what you mean to me. If I can't be with you I'm finished—absolutely done in."

Thus was the transparent barrier she had made, broken, smashed into a thousand pieces. He could not only see, he could touch her now. He did. He had seized her hand. He was clutching it in his fingers and kissing it, as though each place he kissed were a separate living part of her.

"Don't send me away!" he begged. "For God's sake, don't do that on me!"

She felt desperate then.

"All right!" she cried. "All right—all right! Only you mustn't touch me—you mustn't kiss me. I'm fond of you, but I don't love you. I could never love you as you are."

He kept away from drinking for seven whole months. Every day of that time he came to meet her after her work was done. Only the fortnight of her holidays she escaped from him, and then he wrote to her every day.

"You're strong like a rock to me," he said. In another letter he said: "You feel to me like the planks in the mud we used to walk on out there."

She sat on the beach of the little seaside place

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where they were staying, and she shouted with laughter when she read that.

The aptness of it! The truth of it! That was all she had become—a plank and in the mud for his feet to walk on. His weight was pressing her down—down into the mud. She felt the physical sensation of it. The mud was rising about her. It choked her laughter. She found she was crying, not laughing, with the tears pouring down her cheeks.

It could not go on for ever. A few weeks after she returned to her work he was drunk again—disgustingly drunk. He stood in front of her like a dog that has eaten its fill of stolen meat. His eyes were blinking.

“This finishes it,” she said.

He nodded.

“You’re ruining my life. I don’t love you, but I’ve no chance of any happiness while you cling on to me. Everyone thinks we’re engaged. We never could be! I couldn’t marry you! It may be cruel. It may be heartless. But I can’t help it. You won’t kill yourself. You haven’t the courage. I haven’t had the courage to end all this with you. I have now. It must end. That’s Nature—and I suppose Nature’s cruel, but she’s right.”

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He stared at her as he would have stared at a shooting party.

"All right," he said; "that's all. It doesn't matter. I'm best out of the way."

He seemed to fall away from her. She had killed him. It was just as if she had put a rifle to her shoulder, pulled the trigger, and blown out his brains. She remained where he had left her, clasping her hands on her face lest she should scream.

The whole of the next week was a continuous nightmare. Every evening she bought the kind of newspaper that would be likely to report suicides. There were plenty—full of them, of murders, of robberies, of crimes of all sorts. But not his.

How long was he going to delay it? When would he find the courage? When would he put her out of this suspense? She grew haggard waiting for it! It was like waiting for the actual sound of a gun that did not go off. Every time she bought an evening paper it was like a finger pressing on the trigger. Every time she searched the columns with no result it was like a gun misfiring, the trigger to be re-cocked, the same suspense to be gone through again.

Independence! She was no more independent

A Cock of the Hat

now than a criminal in a condemned cell. When would the door open and the men come one morning to tell her her awful freedom had arrived ?

At last they came.

She had finished work. She came out into the street. She bought her paper. Her hands were trembling now as she spread it open.

“ Suicide—woman throws herself from a top-story window.”

“ Suicide—a young man——” Her heart held still. She stood on the pavement where she was and shut her eyes.

The sound of the horn of a motor car, familiar to her ears, opened them. She stared into the traffic. There was the two-seater. He was driving it. Beside him was a girl about her own age. They were both laughing. He blew the horn again and shot away in front of a motor-bus.

The next morning she faced the mirror once more. There was no colour in her cheeks. There were black smudges beneath her eyes. There were no children there—only a tired woman. But she smiled.

Then she cocked her hat.

HATE

THE official of the Extraordinary Commission sat in his office in the Nevsky Prospect. In the days of the Tsar, even until after the First Revolution, the house had been a private residence standing near the Smolenyi Convent, where the great broad street approaches the Neva. Following the Second Revolution, it had been appropriated by the Communist Government and used by them as offices.

Tchikernoff, official of the Extraordinary Commission, in pursuit of his duties, occupied the whole of the second floor of this house in the Nevsky Prospect. His own private room, where he wrote his reports and examined those who were brought before him by the numberless spies who work zealously in the service of the Commission, was in the front of the house overlooking the street. He had an eye for law-breakers, and sometimes saw things from his windows that roused his suspicion and led ultimately to arrest. There were people who knew Tchikernoff's windows and walked by them in the street below as

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though they were treading upon iron gratings revealing a chill depth beneath.

The Extraordinary Commission was established late in the year 1917 to protect the Soviet Government against espionage, banditage, sabotage, and speculation. This "speculation" is a complicated term. It includes trading of every description not in keeping with Communist principles. For those who have never realized anything but the satisfaction of possession of that which they have justly earned, it is difficult to comprehend a state of affairs in which the bare necessities of life, lasting from one day to another, are the only things which one can call one's own. This is the professed ideal of Communist Russia; what is more is that it is an ideal conveyed by various measures into practice—measures stern and oftentimes tyrannous. Whatever they may be, it is the law.

This speculation is as much a crime as theft would be in England. It is tinged with dis-honour. It is as dangerous to the community. Punishment for its offence varies, according to the sentiments of the man who dispenses justice. Mostly the punishment is severe. Those who have known the sting of the lash, who have watched in the damp gloom of prison the sand

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of their life run out to its last grain, who have been driven as cattle are driven into the hold of a ship, along the long roads to Siberia, have formed a preconception of punishment it would be difficult to temper with gentleness.

The most common form of speculation is that of the private trader who buys food in the country where it is plentiful and sells secretly in the town at a substantial profit. Bread made from white flour is only given to invalids and young children in small quantities. There are traders, if one can find them in the city's hiding-places, who will sell white flour for a price. It is a dangerous transaction. When one of a family has suddenly disappeared to return no more, it becomes a measure of expediency to keep to the law.

Neither is it wise to possess more than a pittance of money, enough to buy food at Government prices from the trader who is permitted to sell his wares in the open streets. More than this is dangerous. It is against the interests of the community.

All such cases as these came before Tchikernoff. He had a way of dealing with them. He had been a porter on the Moscow Railway. He knew the little smuggling habits people have. He knew their meannesses, their insolence, their

Hate

contempt of the man who struggled beneath a load. He had heard their conversation when no one would ever have thought a porter on a railway platform, bending beneath the weight of heavy luggage, would have been listening to what was being said. Peculiarly he was adapted to deal with such cases as these. He had a sharp way of asking questions, betraying an intelligence not to be expected in a railway porter, and certainly not in him when he had occupied that position.

Then he had been a lazy, idle fellow, the first to mutter discontent, the first to shirk his burden if he could, the first to throw it down when the Revolution came.

But Tchikernoff in that office on the Nevsky Prospect was a different being. He was sharp, alert, a swift examiner, thrusting questions that pierced between the armour of indifference and deceit. They valued him in the Commission. "Tchikernoff," they said, "is a quick fellow. Communism has made a man of him." It was true. He had never been a man when he was porter on the railway. But now his wits were keen. Communism indeed had put an edge upon his intelligence. He even looked a shrewd, a typically energetic member of society.

It was natural enough he should rejoice in the

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New Government. Any man will rejoice at that which brings the man out of him. We all know with conviction there is a man in every one of us if only circumstance and opportunity would give it a chance. They had given a full chance to Tchikernoff, and readily he had availed himself of them. He was a respected member of the community now. Then he had been but a makeshift of a man, heaped with his load as a beast of burden is heaped—driven to his work as a beast is driven.

“They did not consider we were men,” he said in different ways at different times: “men with feelings, sensitive as theirs, with flesh that could bleed and limbs that could ache and hearts that beat, just as theirs did. What’s the good of being a human being if you can’t understand these things? That’s human nature—to understand. It’s no more than beast nature to shut one’s eyes to it.”

This was the temper of his speech which he made once near the Martyrs’ Memorial in the Field of Mars, where lie the bones of those who suffered unspeakable terrors and tortures for their cause.

“Tchikernoff is a speaker,” the people said. “He has high sentiments. Beast nature was just what they had.”

Hate

But, remember, this was Tchikernoff turned orator, shouting out sentiments instead of the cries one hears in the railway stations—the same human being, but with different—quite different—externals to the man on the Petrograd-Moscow railway.

For the first few months there were numberless cases of speculation to be dealt with. Tchikernoff was one of the busiest men in Petrograd. He was questioning prisoners all the afternoon and, except for those evenings when seats are reserved at the Opera for the Commissars and officials, he was working till late at night at his papers. He loved the Opera, and never missed his seat. Who could have believed, seeing him sitting there in rapt attention, neatly dressed except for his boots, that this was Tchikernoff, the discontented and idle railway servant who used to drop one's luggage when his back was overloaded and never so much as apologized for any of the contents he might have injured?

One morning two of the Commission spies brought before him a man they called Nekoff, who lived in a garret at the top of a house in one of the streets on the other side of the Neva. He was a pitiable sight. The pallid colour of hunger was painted on his cheeks, the glitter of it was in

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his eyes—a sharp, false glitter, as different from the light of health as is that of a piece of tinselled paste under a glaring light from the flash of a real stone. His clothes, which had been mended, were torn again. They hung loosely upon his shoulders and about his limbs as outer garments do when they have nothing between them and the bare skin. He wore no socks or stockings, but on his feet were a pair of boots, well worn, shapeless in style, but with soles and heels to them and whole in every respect.

“Nekoff,” said the agent when they had brought him in ; and then, having given his address—if it could be called such—he said: “ Show your boots.”

Nekoff held up first one boot, then the other, like a horse about to be shod. Tchikernoff looked at them from over the top of his desk.

“ Where did you get those ? ” he asked.

“ From me,” the agent replied.

“ How ? ”

“ I found a Jew trading with them. He got away. I kept the boots. We suspected this Nekoff of having some money. He was buying things in the market. He—living there on the other side of the Neva! I made acquaintance with him. He had bare feet then. I thought he might

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want a pair of boots. One of his toes had been bitten—frost—it was nasty. I offered them to him when we were in a quiet place. He was quite eager and brought this out of his pocket."

The agent laid on Tchikernoff's desk a beautiful woman's ring, a carbuncle on emerald—priceless almost in a Bond Street shop. The Commission official took it up and looked at it

" You let him have them for that!" said he.

" I wanted to catch him."

" He must have thought you a fool."

Nekoff spoke for the first time.

" I thought he had made a good bargain," he said quietly.

Tchikernoff looked at him sharply. The voice told what he was—the pride hunger could not subdue, the refinement poverty could not drive out, the unmistakable something in class which speech betrays.

" Oh! you thought he'd made a good bargain," he repeated. " You haven't yet got out of your mind what these things are worth."

" When I gave it to my wife," said Nekoff, " it was worth a thousand pairs of boots."

" The world is all the other way round now," replied Tchikernoff solemnly. " Necessities have found their true value. Trumperies like this——"

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He picked up the ring again and looked at it, then dropped it contemptuously on the desk so that it rolled on to the floor. The agent picked it up with indifference. "Trumperies like that have found theirs. I wouldn't give you my pair of boots—they are boots"—he thrust one out for Nekoff to see; the toe-cap was falling away from the upper—"not for ten rings like that. I know what I want to help me to live and keep me warm. Is your wife's finger any the colder because that's gone from it? Will that keep her from frostbite?"

"My wife is dead," said Nekoff.

"When did she die?"

"She was killed in her bedroom, the first night of the First Revolution."

"Where were you?"

"I was in Austria."

"Fighting?"

"Yes."

"What rank?"

"General."

"General Nekoff?"

"Yes."

Tchikernoff opened a drawer of his desk and, taking out some papers showing innumerable type-written lists, he looked them through in silence.

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One page after another he turned over whilst the prisoner and the two agents waited. At last he looked up, putting the papers back in their drawer, repeating Nekoff's rank, the particular army in which he had served, the precise command he had been given.

" You do not seem to have distinguished yourself."

" It would have been hard to distinguish oneself where I was and with the men I had."

A light in Tchikernoff's eye struck like the spark from a flint.

" That was the old cry of those in command," he said sharply. " The men! The men who gave their lives—the men who bled to make the reputation of those safely in the rear."

" I did not mean that," said Nekoff imper-
turbably. " The men were brave enough. It
was the way they were armed. You cannot fight
bullets with your fist."

" Not armed ? "

" A lot of them were not."

" The fact remains, you did not distinguish
yourself ? "

" I agree. I should not have been a soldier."

" What then ? "

Nekoff shrugged his shoulders.

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“ I might have been an artist.”

Tchikernoff laughed.

“ My father was a soldier. He had influence. The army was chosen for me. I should not have chosen it myself.”

There was no more to be said about that. Tchikernoff looked at the ring again.

“ You know that this private trading is against the law ? ”

“ I knew it,” said Nekoff; “ I don’t know that I had quite realized it.”

“ You do now ? ”

“ I do now.”

“ Take off those boots.”

Nekoff bent down and untied the laces, removing the boots from his bare feet and revealing the festering sore where the frost had plied its teeth.

“ How did you get this ring if your wife was killed while you were away ? ”

“ Murdered.”

“ Killed—while you were away.”

“ She had hidden a little box of her jewels for safety. No one knew what might happen. She took that precaution and left me word where they were. I found them when I returned.”

“ You’ve got them still ? ”

Hate

“ Most of them.”

“ Where you live ? ”

A thread of a smile parted Nekoff’s lips.

“ Where I live,” said he.

Tchikernoff nodded to one of the agents, who left the room.

“ Are they all your wife’s jewels ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ You would have sold them all ? ”

“ All but one or two.”

“ You do no work for the Commune ? ”

“ No.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ I have tried. I am of no service.”

“ The army ? ”

“ I have tried that. My record was not good enough. I am too old for the ranks. Besides, I said what I have said to you.”

“ That you should not have been a soldier ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ So you are idle, good-for-nothing ? ”

“ I have no trade.”

“ I say, you are idle, good-for-nothing ? ”

“ Have you never been idle ? ”

“ Answer my question ! ”

“ Yes—I am. Good-for-nothing. True—I might not have been. I might have been an

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artist if I had studied. I draw now sometimes in my room when I can get paper; but my drawings are"—he smiled—"I know how poor they are."

Tchikernoff looked at him. From head to foot he looked, then brought his direct gaze back into Nekoff's eyes.

"Do you never feel ashamed of yourself?" he asked.

"It would surprise you to hear that I do—often."

"How? Why?"

"I feel ashamed sometimes to think how much I hate the people who have got the things I want."

"What things?"

"White bread—a little soup sometimes—clothes beneath their coats." He looked down at his feet—"Boots."

"You hate them?"

"Yes."

"But you've no right to them. You don't or won't work. What right have you to hate anyone?"

"That makes my hatred the more."

"You hated us just as much when you had the power. Your words were spittle in our faces, you hated us so."

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Nekoff was silent.

"Now you know what it is to hate us for our bread and our soup and our boots, as we hated you for your motor-cars—and these."

He picked up the ring and dropped it again. This time it fell into the ink-pot, and with a laugh he picked it out with a pen.

"You're learning something?"

"Undoubtedly."

"You're learning the community that must exist—the community of work to make a fellowship of mankind?"

"I suppose I am."

"You're learning that love comes out of sharing each other's burdens, not out of laying the burden on others?"

Nekoff looked up.

"Do you always speak like this to people who are brought before you?"

"Whenever I have the time."

"Where did you learn it all?"

"That has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing?"

"If you wish to know, I learnt it from living it."

"You live as you speak?"

"I am a Communist."

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"That is only a name. Aristocrat was only a name."

"Covering hatred!"

"All names cover something. They don't do any more."

Tchikernoff leant back in his chair.

"You are trying to be intelligent and clever," he remarked.

"I was only saying what I thought. I say again, names do not always cover the things they represent."

A messenger came in without knocking and laid a paper on Tchikernoff's desk. The messenger went out and Tchikernoff looked at the paper.

"Interesting though this conversation is," said he, "I must put an end to it. You are guilty of speculation, which is a crime against the State. You will learn your sentence later. Wait outside."

The agent conducted Nekoff to the door. There he turned.

"Shall I be allowed," he asked, "to keep the few things I have?"

"They belong to the State."

"They were mine. I gave them all to my wife. There are one or two I would not sell if I were starving."

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"They belong to the State," Tchikernoff repeated. "You will understand the fellowship of mankind some day, perhaps. Wait outside."

Nekoff passed out and the door was closed. The official turned to his agent.

"Put him in a cell to-night," he said abruptly, "to be shot to-morrow morning. He need not hate longer than that."

The agent nodded his head and departed.

Tchikernoff stared at the paper on his desk, then he rose from his chair and, crossing the room to where Nekoff had stood, he picked up the pair of boots and looked at them.

Having taken note of all their qualifications, he laid them down and, returning to his desk, wrote on a list headed "Confiscations":

"Excellent pair of boots worth seventy thousand roubles."

"A gold ring with a green stone."

THE APHIS

MRS. CRADDOCK had a grievance. It was not exactly against her husband, for it was no fault of his. But it intimately concerned him. She was not the only woman who has harboured this kind of grievance. She was not the only woman who, launching her resentment against the tide of fate, has swamped the joy of quite harmless individuals by the wash of her invective.

Half the pleasure, half the sense of release in coming home every evening to Pinner from his office in Bishopsgate Street Within, was snatched from Mr. Craddock by his wife's complaints that he had been away all day.

" You go to your office," she said. " It's no good pretending it's a hardship. You've never missed your train yet. You go to your office and there are men there to talk to. You needn't tell me you don't talk. That one time I came and called for you, I saw the sort of work that is done in an office in the City. I know I didn't see you. You were in with the manager. But I sat there watching the other men. That Mr. Gawthorne

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you say is such a good sort. A good sort to waste his time. I could give him that recommendation in the quarter of an hour I was sitting there."

"He had a rise the other day," said Mr. Craddock gently. "He was made chief cashier."

There are some women who can take the most salient points of an argument against them and use them in their own favour. It is as though, in the act of being kicked, they had caught the foot that kicked them by an adroit movement and upset their opponent on the floor.

Mrs. Craddock was one of these.

"It just shows," said she, "how cunning he must be to keep the manager from knowing what goes on in the office. I knew I didn't like that man. Cunning—mean—I could see that in his face. Why didn't you get the rise? You've been with them twenty-three years."

A little confused, Mr. Craddock replied:

"I suppose I wasn't cunning enough."

He had meant to say "clever," but it was no good altering it then. Mrs. Craddock had said "Ah!"—and that had seemed to lock up the word "cunning" in the archives of historical accuracy. It could never be "clever" then.

"Well—there you sit and talk," she went on. "Two of those young clerks were playing a

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game—with buttons, if you please! I don't know what it was."

It did not please Mr. Craddock that she had made this observation, because it was quite true. They did play a game in the office, on the drawing-table—eleven buttons a side, flicked like tiddly-winks with a large counter, slithering along the polished surface, striking against a little ball of silver paper and driving it between goal posts at each end of the table. The final of the cup-tie was to be played that very week. He had put sixpence on Tottenham Hotspurs and stood to win three shillings of good money. In the Tottenham Hot-spur team was a button off his greatcoat—a great big fat button, playing goal, that had distinguished itself in the tightest corners all through the season.

In every room in that house in Pinner, Mrs. Craddock had looked for that button off Mr. Craddock's greatcoat, little dreaming that it was performing a higher service as goal-keeper in Bishopsgate Street Within.

"I don't suppose," Mrs. Craddock would continue in this conversation, which admittedly is composite, representing many years' airing of her grievance, "I don't suppose you waste your time in that silly fashion, playing with buttons! Like

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schoolboys! But I'll be bound you have plenty to say when the manager's in his room. How long do they give you for lunch?"

"An hour."

"An hour! I sit down here, all by myself, at one o'clock sharp, and I'm finished and back to my work at fifteen minutes past. Cheese and salad—often I don't have more than that. Sometimes an egg. Meat, I expect you have?"

In that short pause, Mrs. Craddock saw the confession of solid food in Mr. Craddock's glance. He tried to lighten it by an honest confession to occasional pie, but the pause had convicted him. Perhaps it was pie—but only when pie was preferable. As well it was roast beef or saddle of mutton—anything, in fact, that was going. When shamefacedly he admitted it was always meat in some form or another, she lifted up the egg again and bore it with her in silence to a Golgotha of her own unmistakable inference.

"And pudding, I suppose?" she added.

There were stewed figs sometimes, but here Mr. Craddock had all the weight of the medical profession at his back. With no little triumph and some mental agility, he translated stewed figs into terms of economy, since without his health in a sedentary occupation what would become of that

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seven pounds ten a week which kept the little house at Pinner ?

Mrs. Craddock submitted to stewed figs, though even here she startled him with a sudden suspicion of variety. Quick in the reflex actions of his mind when there was scarcely time to think, he admitted she was right.

“ Sometimes it’s stewed prunes,” said he.

She passed from the question of food to that of time.

“ An hour ! ” she said. “ Doesn’t take you all that time, surely, to eat a little bit of food. What do you do then ? Talk, I suppose, with your Mr. Gawthorne. Do *you* play at buttons ? ”

She had that command of irony as when, in such hands as hers, it becomes like a probing instrument. She extracted the truth from Mr. Craddock as a dentist takes a nerve out of a tooth.

Without any real necessity for the confession, he admitted that they played dominoes, and then wondered why on earth he had said it. She had not really thought they played at buttons—not in a City restaurant.

Well, there it was ! The truth was out. She had made it plain to him why he never missed his train in the morning; how he had the best of life

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while she suffered the abomination of desolation in that little house at Pinner.

There was not the slightest good his saying that there were moments, many of them, in that office up in Bishopsgate Street Within, when, seeing the sun shine through the smoke of all the myriad chimneypots, he would have given half his salary and all his chances in the success of Tottenham Hotspurs, and every fig that had ever been stewed, just to slip out into their little garden and see their meagre array of flowers in the bright heat of the day. There was no good his telling her how often, when he came home in the evening, he noticed the deck-chair on the lawn, on which she had been sitting for a few moments, not wasting her time, but breathing a space of sweet air. There was no good his comparing the gentle quiet of that house in Pinner with the soul-shattering pandemonium of Bishopsgate Street, within or without.

He was not supposed to have a soul. Mrs. Craddock would much have preferred that he had found the button off his greatcoat than that he discovered he had a soul.

On one occasion, after a visit of the vicar's on a Saturday afternoon, she had once said what she thought of the soul. She had seen the

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impression the vicar's conversation had made upon Mr. Craddock. He had become thoughtful and was tearing a frayed strip off a paper lamp-shade. She had moved the whole lamp out of his reach, and she had said:

"I see no difference between those church people coming and talking of a hereafter than a man ringing the bell and wanting to sell you a piano. I don't care whether it's a soul or a piano, or what it is. All they think about is the job it makes for them keeping it in tune."

So, whatever ambitions or yearnings Mr. Craddock may have had for that immortal part of him, it was useless to indulge in them in Pinner, whatever he might do in Bishopsgate Street Within.

Between these two places, the two horizons, the North and the South Pole of his compass of life, Mr. Craddock saw nothing but a weary track upon which he was eternally moving to and fro. He would take his seat in the train every morning and every evening, and, though he always read the paper, the news did not enter his mind so deeply as those three beats, like a pulse, the uk-tuk-tuk of the carriage-wheels as they passed over the sleepers. Sometimes they went faster than others, and this always afforded him a sense

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of exhilaration, a feeling, not comprehensible in words to him, that if he had not a soul to transport him, at least his body was hurtling through space with a higher speed than usual.

Perhaps the worst part of it all was his knowledge that, wearisome though it might be, he knew in his heart Mrs. Craddock was right. He had the best of it—the variety—the exchange of ideas with his fellow-creatures in the office—the excitement of the cup-ties on the drawing-table—the stewed figs which she knew of and the pastries which he had never mentioned—the cups of hot coffee standing by the side of the little pile of dominoes—the excitement of the penny on each game; in fact, all the numerous enlivenments contributing to a kind of oblivion that he was alive which only left him when he heard the carriage-wheels pulsing over the sleepers.

Mrs. Craddock's arguments were so convincing. He knew of nothing with which to confute them. Once, when he had mentioned the presence of the deck-chair on the lawn, she had looked at him with such pity that he had felt what a brute he was.

"Do you grudge me a moment's peace?" she asked him. "Do you think one can go on for ever dusting out rooms, scrubbing floors,

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cooking food, washing dishes, without any rest or any relaxation at all?"

She used the right words, the words that were most convincing, the words a man needs all his wits about him to wrestle with and overthrow. Calling it a relaxation to sit for perhaps two hours at a stretch in their little garden on sunny days, reading the works of those exciting writers who never let you stop to think, was an achievement of phrase beyond the critical inquiry of Mr. Craddock. He could not attack it with analysis or shrewd examination as she had done with his stewed figs.

She kept him with that same virulent circumspection that an ant keeps a green-fly. She might have admitted, had she known anything of natural history, that this was her regard of the relation of the sexes. Mr. Craddock lived in that blind existence of the aphis that knows nothing of what is going on in the ant-hill. He never dreamed of an exciting novel as a part of that paraphernalia on the lawn. His attention was drawn regularly to the weeding of the beds in the garden. How nearly Mrs. Craddock's back was broken over these exertions, he knew to the minutest of sensations in the lumbar region. She said nothing of the joy—scarcely spiritual in her case—of the

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blossoming flowers in a cleanly weeded bed. Mr. Craddock never approached the thought of comparing flowers with inky figures in the bed of a heavy ledger. She did not give him that opportunity. He knew nothing of the little chats over tea in their own house and in the houses of others when the scandals that were discussed and confirmed were more alluring than any success of the Tottenham Hotspurs on the drawing-table in the office.

In brief, Mrs. Craddock succeeded in doing what a great many women essay. She succeeded in persuading her husband that all the liberty of life was in his hands, blunting thereby the edge of what little liberty he had and securing for herself the peaceful enjoyment of that liberty in her home where even the arrival of the tax-collector is an opportunity for the exchange of ideas since he knows it is the man up in the City who has to pay.

Yet in the end Mr. Craddock defeated her. Some credit might be allowed him for that if it were not that he believed he was serving her to the last.

He was called into the manager's office one day and offered a good pension after twenty-five years of work in the office, if he thought he would like to make way for a younger man.

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It was put to him in such a way that the thought automatically became paramount. He said he would consider the offer, and that evening, as he went home in the train to Pinner, the wheels of the carriages over the sleepers shouted, Ha! Ha! Ha!

He noticed the difference, and remarked to a train companion how fast they were travelling.

“Hadn’t noticed it,” said his friend.

But Mr. Craddock had. Ha! Ha! Ha! the carriage chuckled over the sleepers. And when they pulled up at Pinner station, the sudden application of the brakes nearly threw him out of his seat. He jumped on to the platform and almost ran home.

“Like to hear a bit of news?” he said to Mrs. Craddock, who was breaking her back over the phlox *Drummondii*.

“Anything in the way of news is welcome here,” said Mrs. Craddock, resting her spine.

“They’ve pensioned me off—pensioned me! I can be with you all day now; help you in the garden, do the weeding for you, do all sorts of things for you—keep you company! They’ve pensioned me off! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

He had caught the rhythmic laughter of the railway carriage chuckling over the sleepers.

The Aphis

"D'y you mean you're not going to the office any more?" asked Mrs. Craddock in a dazed voice.

"No! No more office! No more dominoes! Cheese and salad at home!"

Mrs. Craddock threw down a handful of weeds and turned round.

"You needn't think you're going to stay at home," she said squarely. "I've got work to do if you haven't; and the sooner you look out for some more, the better."

The next Sunday, when Mr. Craddock heard the vicar talk about the immortality of the soul, he muttered "Tosh!" under his breath, and the first thing on Monday morning, beginning his last month in Bishopsgate Street Within, he went into the manager's office.

"I've thought about the pension," he said, "and I'd sooner stay on."

"You've given us twenty-five of your best," said the manager. "It'll be no discredit to you if you take a rest now."

"This is a rest," said Mr. Craddock. "I'm only sixty. This is a rest."

TO-HELL CORKERY

YOUNG Leggatt told me this story, and there must be many like it. But so few people tell them. Either it is because this affair has lost the proportions it had in people's minds, or because there are few young men like Leggatt who are subject to a strong conflicting sense of duty, and still fewer men like Corkery cherishing ideals about women.

I don't know Corkery, and have no other impression of him except that which I have gathered from Leggatt's disjointed remarks and descriptions. Leggatt can describe a football match played by fifteen a side. He is quite lucid about the war on the western front in his particular sector. But of individuals he knows no more than what he feels about them. He has a kind of hero-worship for Corkery. Apparently when he first came to London, a raw youth from Scotland, Corkery, who is ten years his senior, took him in hand. Corkery had chambers in Clifford's Inn. He knew his Fleet Street. He knew all the odd little clubs from Ludgate Circus

To-hell Corkery

to Covent Garden, of which the Yorrick was almost aristocratic by reason of its proximity to the West End. He knew the various eating-houses, the sort of dishes and the kind of people you might expect to find there. There was an old mahogany barrel of whisky with brass bands and a fine old brass tap standing on a polished oak trestle in the corner of his room. He justly regarded it as a piece of furniture. His friends considered it an ornament. Rightly, as far as I can judge. Corkery had kept the best whisky in it for over twelve years, and it was never emptied.

This is not a story about a barrel of whisky, but that is the way to keep the stuff if you like it good.

Corkery's friends apparently liked it that way. In those rooms of his in Clifford's Inn he entertained the most extraordinary mixture of men from the Stock Exchange to the Monico. When you come to think of it, that allows of considerable variety, since it includes the whole of journalistic Fleet Street, the Bar, quite a few theatres, including the Empire of the old days, not to speak of those artists, poets, and writers who live in top stories as near to the source of their income as possible, so that they do not have far to take their material—or bring it back.

The Rossetti

Corkery himself was in a ship-broker's office, and in Bishopsgate and Creechurh Lane was known as "To-hell Corkery," not so much because that was a common expression of his in conversation as that it was the manner of the man in contact with anything that was not above-board, straight, clean, or decent in the ordinary affairs of life.

His relations with women, if not what is known as orthodox or conventional in Onslow Gardens, were at any rate honest and above-board in Clifford's Inn. Wives are not allowed in the Temple, for example. But when Hare Court was burnt down some years ago no surprise was expressed at the number of ladies in what might be called "hasty garments" who took refuge in Pump Court and the Cloisters. It was not considered essential to the dignity and chastity of the Law that, rather than reveal themselves, they should be burnt at their posts, whatever those posts might happen to be. There were certainly no children, and it is to be assumed that this is what the Benchers wish to avoid. They do not demand celibacy so much as that state of man which is not inconsistent with peace. The Law only assumes innocence before a jury.

In Clifford's Inn, then, Corkery lived the

To-hell Corkery

ordinary life of a bachelor before the War, that is to say, before the Empire Theatre was done away with as an institution and the dancing clubs had taken its place. He had numerous friends of all kinds, many of whom he introduced to young Leggatt. He had poker parties up in his rooms where you would have found Dalberry, the poet, who never had the appearance of sobriety till night, by which time he was completely drunk. There would be a journalist, an actor, out of or rehearsing a part, and perhaps a couple of stock-brokers.

Sometimes you would find Corkery with a man of the Law and a writer arguing on metaphysics, economics, and ethics till the small hours of the morning. And always there was the fine brass tap of that whisky barrel, with the little brass cup beneath to catch the drips. It was seldom turned on to excess, except when Dalberry was there. He needed it to make him presentable. Otherwise Corkery, for all his knowledge of the spirit, was an abstemious man.

Sometimes you would find the outer oak door of Corkery's rooms closed. On these occasions, if you knew what you were doing, you went discreetly downstairs again without bothering to knock or find out whether by any chance he was in.

The Rossetti

Apart from all this, I have gathered there was another side to Corkery. He was not so much religious in himself as they might say who describe a person as being well in themselves. But he was deeply interested in religion. He knew the priests in Maiden Lane Chapel, and would often go and sit with them in the presbytery and talk. He frequently went to Mass there, and to Sardinia Street Chapel before they thought they wanted something better built for the honour of God. Together with this was a clear artistic appreciation of beauty in art, in literature, and in most things.

Apparently he admired Dalberry because, in some of his most drunken moments, he had written some rather fine poetry. He would give up any game of poker with stockbrokers and men out of the City for a jaw with a writer man or an artist. He read a great deal. He had a nice taste in the small collections of pictures on his walls which were not of any modern school. That to-hell quality about him inclined him to a hearty appreciation of Hogarth. He also had some nice old furniture, and revealed a passion for old glass of which he was somewhat of a connoisseur.

These are the impressions I have gathered and pieced together of a man whose acquaintance

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I should certainly like to make. But the circumstances which brought young Leggatt and me into contact did not operate so far as Corkery was concerned. At the time of this story I had not so much as seen a photograph of him. I fancy there wasn't one. To anyone asking for a photograph of himself, I can quite imagine him saying :

“ To-hell with photographs! ”

At the age of thirty-two he had known a few pretty women, and there was not a sign of a portrait of any one of them in his rooms at Clifford's Inn.

They had been friends about a year when young Leggatt became engaged to be married to a girl in Scotland. On these matters Corkery gave him much sound advice, but, with all his experience of them, it appears to have been the advice of a man who knows as much about the sex as any man professing to understand it.

“ Women,” he said to Leggatt, “ are like colts. They want breaking in. If the firmness of your grasp doesn't exceed the gentleness of your temper, you've got about as much chance of mastering them as Dalberry has of dying sober.”

Leggatt asked me what I thought of this

The Rossetti

advice, and, as usually happens when a young man is seeking counsel amongst his friends on so hackneyed a subject as this, I flung a few truisms at him. Just as Corkery had done. Few men have the sheer, downright honesty to say they don't know anything about it. Finally, I said:

"What's the good of listening to people's opinions? If you're in for it, you're in for it. There comes a point when it's as inevitable as an execution. Put your head in the bag, shut your eyes and drop. It's soon over. What happens after is hidden from the wisest of us."

When the nervous prison chaplain said to the condemned prisoner, "Well, you've got a fine day for it," he said about the most sensible thing a man could say under the circumstances.

Leggatt dropped into matrimony, and I fancy that Corkery saw as little of him after that as Clifford's Inn as I did for week-ends down in the country. Probably we both missed his cheery youthfulness. He was quite a nice lad. One who stimulates in you a feeling of protectiveness. Knowing something of what life is, you wince a little at the thought of his being hurt by it.

How he got on with his wife it would not be possible to say. I have my suspicions. When a man marries, he seems to enter some place of the

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soul's abode and close a door behind him. From that point of view you know little about him afterwards. Blinds are drawn and put up in that house, windows are opened and shut, curtains are pulled, lights are lighted and put out. Sometimes there are sounds of music from one of the rooms. Sometimes all is silent. Once he has closed that door, one can only judge by these things. All the rest is mystery. Of any certain happening to him one is only sure when, passing that house one day, you see the scaffold up, the housebreakers at work, and the carts waiting in the road to take the debris away.

There were no signs of dissolution when he wrote one day to me asking if he could come down, just for the night, and have a yarn with me. I told him I should be delighted to see him.

We talked of general things over dinner. My wife liked him. She had the capacity of drawing him out. He gave us the impression that he was quite happy, but it was of Corkery he talked more than of his wife. Back to Corkery he came again and again. He had not been down himself to Clifford's Inn, but Corkery had been out many times to Campden Hill to see him.

I could feel there was something on his mind

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about his friend, and after dinner, in my little smoking-room, he brought it out.

"I think Corkery's fallen in love," said he.

For a moment the sound of that gave me a nasty jar. Apart from the fact that it seemed an extraordinary thing to have happened to a man like Corkery who appeared to get all he wanted out of life without the responsibility of marriage, I felt it a little odd that Leggatt should have come all this way to tell me so.

"Who with?" I asked sharply.

"With my wife's sister," said he.

I felt a corresponding jerk of relief.

"Well, that's all right, isn't it?"

He replied that he wasn't quite sure.

"Barring you," said he, "Corkery's the best friend I have. He was splendid to me when I first came to London. I was only a kid. I must have bored him pretty considerably, but he took me about. I practically lived in his chambers in Clifford's Inn. Besides that, he's a topner. He deserves the very best."

"Of matrimony?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Won't he get it?"

He looked at me for a long while as a man does when he is wrestling with his conscience, and

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then he told me one of those quaint little tales which reveal the conceit there is in some men where their conquest of a woman is concerned.

"I was staying with my wife's people up in Scotland," he said, "before we were married. They were short of rooms. I was given her sister's bedroom, and Connie—that's her name—shared a room with my wife. It was a funny sort of a bed, the bed I had. Draped—d'you know the sort of thing I mean?"

I shook my head.

"Well, it was an ordinary bed, but it had some patterned, musliny sort of stuff draped from the foot up to a ring in the ceiling and then spreading out again to the head of the bed. Regular sort of frippery that a girl thinks adds to the beauty of her beauty sleep."

"How old is she, this Connie?"

"Eighteen."

"Go ahead."

"Well, one night—it was summer—almighty hot—I felt I couldn't breathe with that drapery business hanging over me, I pulled it off the head of the bed, and there on the wallpaper behind it I saw, written in pencil, half a dozen different dates—August 14th—and so on. Sometimes a week in between 'em. Sometimes only a day."

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He stopped and looked directly at me.

"Well?" said I. I refused to see what he meant. I refused to let him see the conclusion I drew. If there was anything like that about his sister-in-law, he must find it out for himself. I wasn't going to help him.

"Go on," I remarked.

"Don't you see?" he said.

"I don't see anything," said I.

"Supposing you knew, as I happened to know from hearing them talk about it, that there was a soldier chap staying in the house just at the time those dates recorded."

"I don't see what that leads you to."

"Or that the dates were made in his handwriting?"

"No; he might have slept in the room like you did, and wanted to make a note of something."

"He didn't. When I was there, the spare room was being papered and done up. When he was there it was all right. He occupied it. Connie occupied her own room."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I don't know what to do. There's Corkery. He doesn't think she's like that. He thinks she's a sort of angel, white out of heaven."

To-hell Corkery

"And how do you know she isn't? What you saw is no proof."

"But I do know."

"How?"

"I didn't put that drapery business back. I forgot about it in the morning. The next night the dates were rubbed out and the following day my wife came to me in the deuce of a temper and asked me what I'd been doing pulling the bed drapery about. I said I hadn't done any harm, and what was the matter? I was pretty certain then. But she left no doubt when she asked me if I'd seen anything. I admitted I'd seen the dates in pencil on the wall, and then she said: "Well, for God's sake, don't say anything about them, especially in front of father or mother."

I don't know what there was about it, but I admit it gave me a nasty taste. Not so much about the girl as about this—soldier chap. The calm, brazen boastfulness of it. Sheer swank of conquest.

"That fella must have been a cad," said I.

He nodded his head and I could see he felt, as in some irresistible way I did myself, that it did not show her in the most delicate of colours.

"Why didn't they get married?"

The Rossetti

"I don't know. I asked that. Women wriggle about that sort of thing."

"So does everybody," said I.

"Corkery doesn't," he replied quickly, and I saw the amount of hero-worship in his friendship. It jumped out of his eyes like sparks out of a piece of willow burning.

"He's not on the point of the pin yet," I remarked.

"No; and he never ought to be."

I looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you think I ought to tell him before it goes any farther?"

"You're extremely young," said I. "If you weren't, you'd have realized that in these affairs men and women have got to look after themselves."

"Then what's friendship for?" he exclaimed.

I was pretty nearly flummoxed for the moment. At a hazard I said: "Friendship hasn't much to do with the vital affairs. This is a vital affair to Corkery and to her. It's his job to look after himself. He knows what women are—or he ought to by this time. You haven't told her anything about him, have you?"

"No."

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"Then why the dickens should you tell him anything about her? There's a rough sort of justice in this life, and friendship's got nothing to do with it. You can't be playing the God out of the machine. As a rôle it won't suit you. What's more, it's not a man's job. Leave it alone. P'raps she'll tell him herself."

He simply repeated: "Women wriggle about that sort of thing."

Then he went unhappily to bed.

I sat there for some time thinking of that—the way he had repeated it—the tone in his voice all the time. Was this some cruel experience of his own? Was he trying to save his friend from a similar blow? Had life hit him that way too?

But the blinds in the house of young Leggatt's soul were drawn. The windows were shut. All was mystery.

I neither saw nor heard anything of him again for some weeks. Then one Saturday afternoon, as I was doing a bit of work in the garden, I heard the gate swing and there he was. No luggage. He had walked from the station—three and a half miles.

"Saints alive!" said I.

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"Alive all right," he replied. "You can keep your saint."

"What do you want?"

"Can you do with me for the week-end?"

"Where's your bag?"

He brought a small paper parcel out of his pocket, unrolled it, and showed me a tooth-brush.

"I can catch the six-thirty back if I'm in the way."

"Go in and show yourself to the lady of our house," I said. "She knows where my pyjamas are. Then come out here."

I watched him walk across the lawn. For all that tooth-brush in his pocket, he might have been carrying his bag and a heavy one. His shoulders had a droop in them. He appeared to be looking more on the ground than ahead of him as he walked. As he passed through the door into the house it did not seem as if I should see him again in a few moments. It all gave me the suggestion that the house had swallowed him up.

When he came out later he was smiling. My wife told me she had patted him on the shoulder. A little thing like that moved him quickly to gratitude. He was that sort of chap.

We messed about in the garden for half an hour, during which time he said nothing about

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himself or Corkery. When I say he said nothing about himself, I mean directly. One poignant thing he did say. I was staking up a clump of delphiniums, those dark blue ones, so cold a blue that it burns like ice. In front of them was a little mass of ruby antirrhinums. He stood on the grass path looking on. Presently he said:

“I wonder what transmigrations the soul has to go through before it can inherit the body of a man who ties up the flowers in his garden in the full consciousness that his wife knows just where his pyjamas are in the house.”

It was foolish enough to laugh at. But, my hat! it was a scarred tongue that said it. I laughed and said something about what some men manage to do in a lifetime, but I finished with the gardening. I threw my ball of tarred twine on to the grass, took his arm, and swung him around.

“Come for a bit of a walk through the wood,” I said; and then, when we were in the deep shade beneath the oak trees, as though in that diffused light it became easier to him, he told me about Corkery.

“I was quite right about Corkery,” he began, and tried to make it seem a casual remark. It was only too obvious that he had been trying it over twenty times in his mind before he actually said it.

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"What about him?" I asked, just as casually because a sudden curiosity on my part might well have frightened him in that mood.

"He's in love with my sister-in-law."

"He told you so?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last evening. He came up to our place to dinner. My wife asked him. She's asked him a lot lately. It's been pretty obvious how things were going with him. But he hadn't said anything to Connie. Last night, after dinner, my wife said: 'Come into the drawing-room as soon as you can. Don't stay there gossiping,' and Corkery said he wanted to have a talk with me, if she didn't mind. I knew what was coming. Suppose they did too."

"But why should he tell you first?" I inquired.

"I'm his friend," said Leggatt quickly, and then added: "At least, he thinks I am. He had it all out in five minutes. That's like Corkery. There are no bushes round about him. He comes straight down a road to whatever he wants. And yet he amazed me. I've never really known what he was like. He began straight away by telling me the sort of life he's lived. As if I didn't know.

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Painted it as black as he could. Said he'd been as rotten as a man could be about women—first this one, then that.

"‘But they're all squared up,’ he kept on saying. ‘I ended with the last one a month ago. We'd known each other for two years, off and on. She guessed what I was going to tell her. She'd brought a little bottle of vitriol with her. She missed. Carpet's in a hell of a mess. All burnt. But that's wound up. There are none now. Not a soul.’

“That's the sort of way he told me—like firing with a pistol from the hip, letting in daylight every shot. There was no need. I knew him pretty well. He'd never paraded it about—but I'd seen his outer door shut. All that and the way he told it was as like him as a camera portrait. Then he suddenly turned and showed me another side of himself I hardly knew existed. And just at that moment I saw something else as well.”

Leggatt stopped so abruptly that it seemed as if he couldn't get the impetus to go on again. It was as though he had dug his front feet in and refused the ditch.

I pricked him with a quiet “What did you see?”

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He had come down there for confidence, but he wanted help even then.

"What did you see?" I repeated.

He leapt then.

"There's a screen by our dining-room door, partly to hide a sort of dumb-waiter where the servants put the dishes they bring in, partly to hold up a draught from the door. You can't see the door over it. And there's a dark picture on one of the walls which, from where I was sitting, reflects that bit of the room behind the screen. Something in the reflection moved and caught my eye. It was fairly indistinct, but I could make it out plain enough. It was Connie. I don't know how long she'd been there. The door must have been left open. She'd slipped in. She was standing behind the screen, listening to everything we said."

It was not so much his words as his tone of voice that was graphic. I could see the room, though I'd never been there. I could see the picture on the wall, darkly whispering its secret. What was more than he said anything about, I could see that girl with her parted lips listening behind her breath. I could feel her heart beating, knew the terror that was in her soul.

There was no need for him to explain why she

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was there. They couldn't quite trust him not to say what he knew. They realized his deep friendship for Corkery. They knew his youthful ideas about the truth of things. She felt her fate as a woman was hanging on a thread. She wanted to know if he told so that she herself could make a clean breast of it if necessary and gain a last chance.

In Leggatt's silence after that, I heard the silence in that room.

"And what was it you saw in Corkery?" I asked presently.

He screwed up his face. He couldn't put words to it. He could only say what happened.

Corkery had begun to tell him he was in love with Connie.

"But I'm not fit to tell her that," said he, "until she knows the sort of dirty beast I am."

"Tell her what you've told me," Leggatt had advised him.

"Tell her!" shouted Corkery. "What a silly young ass you are! It 'ud have done you more good than it has me if you knew a little more about women. Tell her! She wouldn't understand a word of it. Tell her! A slip of a girl like that, with her sweet little mind. Do you want me to besmirch the very thing I'm in love with?"

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Can't you see that's how it comes back on a man, the sort of life he's lived? I can't tell her unless she knows the truth about me. I can't play hypocrite with any sense of pleasure. And then if I tell her, think of the mud I throw at her mind. Oh! to hell with women! I never thought they could hit you as hard as this.

"That was a Corkery I never knew about," said Leggatt. "That was a Corkery I hadn't seen before. He was as near blubbing as a man can get who's probably never blubbed in his life."

But I wasn't thinking of Corkery just then. I was thinking of that shivering girl behind the screen. What must have been in her mind, hearing what Corkery thought of her? With more reason she could say: "To hell with men for putting women on such pedestals of virtue!"

I asked Leggatt what he said then.

"Said! What was there to say to a man who's gone blind and is stretching out his hand on the edge of a pit? What was there to say but tell him the truth?"

"You didn't tell him!" I exclaimed.

"No." He snapped his lips on it. "What you said last time I was down here stuck. 'Friendship has nothing to do with the vital

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affairs.' I remembered that. I couldn't get away from it. Only one way I could get out at all."

"What way?"

"I made some excuse about wanting to get a pipe out of my room. I went straight to the door. I was at it before she could see me coming. I went out of the room. She tried to come out with me. I was too quick for her. I shut the door and held it. She rattled the handle trying to open it. Then I heard Corkery's voice."

"What happened then?"

"I left the door and went to my room."

"Did she come out?"

"No."

"What has happened?"

"They're engaged to be married."

"Does he know?"

"How can I tell? They've said nothing to me and he's said nothing."

"What does he look like?"

"Like a man who's seen God."

CAT'S CRADLE

GERALD ANSELL was not at first aware of it, but Mrs. Loring, despite all evidence to the contrary, was one of those women who is far better married to her husband. He discovered this fact later for himself.

It would not be in justice to the parties concerned to say who began it. In matrimonial affairs justice is a term that must be restricted to the Law Courts. Certain facts are presented there, and certain determinations arrived at upon the facts. Beyond these determinations justice is the child of gossip; a child, moreover, of much wisdom if it knows its own father.

Ansell was one of those engaging young men —young is also a term—who, by reason of a certain chivalrous attitude towards women, drift from one entanglement to another, and not infrequently end up by being bachelors. It all depends upon the nature of the entanglements. Sometimes the knot is too elaborate. The most adroit fingers cannot unravel it. With a spasmodic, and sometimes impatient jerk of the strings the knot is

tightened beyond undoing. In so doing, it is hoped by the parties concerned to render it invisible. But there are always some inquisitive people who have a special faculty for discovering knots.

The lives of Gerald Ansell and Mrs. Loring were getting entangled. This is a subtle process. No one knows exactly how it begins. In their case it may have begun at the Carruthers's dinner-party, when, finding themselves seated next to each other at dinner and discovering subjects in common, they were the more conscious of being bored when kept apart in the drawing-room. Ansell was introduced to a girl with a sloping face before which even chivalry was not at its best. Mrs. Loring had to talk to her host, and then to a man who lived ten months of the year in Shanghai, and brought the East about with him till you got tired of it and wished the year were composed of ten months.

It was Ansell who made a point of saying good night to Mrs. Loring. She mentioned a luncheon-party, volunteered her address, and hazarded the possibility of his making one of them. Some of the knottiest of entanglements have these harmless beginnings—a piece of string, picked up at random. What more natural then, for mere

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amusement's sake, it should contribute to the making of a cat's cradle ? And then, after a few exchanges from sensitive fingers, who is to foresee that it may soon be in the very devil of a mess ?

Undoubtedly they discovered the string of their lives at Mrs. Carruthers's dinner-party. Contact with Mr. Loring at luncheon later, probably revealed to them that knot in the string which, tying both ends together, prepares it for that harmless amusement known as "cat's cradle" and all those little parlour tricks that can inexpensively be played to while away time.

Mr. Loring was a gentle, harmless little man who adored his wife so much that he never bothered her with it. This is a quality of affection few men achieve.

After that luncheon-party Ansell came to tea. There he saw her alone. This was the first time she became fully conscious of his capacity for chivalrous understanding of women ; the first time he was made aware of the tragedy of a woman who has had too much spare time to learn that she is happily married.

They sat in her dimly-shaded drawing-room on a late evening in autumn. The firelight was making sufficient excuse for the lights not to be put on. They had drunk their tea in pregnant

Cat's Cradle

and comparative silence. The sympathy between them—which is as natural and occasional between human beings as it is between animals on four legs—was conscious to both.

There was the piece of string, knotted at the point where she had married Mr. Loring. It lay, as you might say, on the tea-table between them. She picked it up.

" You make me frightened, you know," she said.

" Why ? "

" You make me feel that I want to tell you everything about myself."

" Is there anything to be afraid of ? "

" Yes. When a woman has been married for some years and doesn't love her husband it is a frightening thing to meet someone to whom she wants to talk about herself."

This is as conventional a cat's cradle as can possibly be made in the first move with an ordinary piece of string. She held it out in her hands—shapely hands. He held out his. They exchanged. He sat staring at the complicated design of ordinary common twine which by this time was clung about his fingers.

The worst of this game is that, once having started, no one likes to put it down. A man is

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afraid to seem afraid. A woman is eager to seem eager. There seems to be a suspicion of cowardliness, even of inhuman heartlessness, in throwing up one's hands and saying :

“ Well, let's drop it now.”

That is the worst of it.

He sat with the ingenious contraption on his fingers, staring at it and, instead of handing it back to her in its original form of a common loop, he fell to wondering what could be made of it next. Their fingers had touched in the exchange. That is what makes it so difficult.

I have never met anyone expert enough to say how many patterns there are to the cat's cradle. The only variation I know of myself is the scissors. That is the ignorance of a mere amateur. There are plenty more.

This which these two played, beginning with the ordinary common loop, arrived at a figure which at least has something to recommend it. Its advantages will be seen.

It came to a point after various meetings—teas at Rumpelmeyer's, lunch at some of those discreet rooms on upper floors in Bond Street—when Gerald Ansell and Mrs. Loring were unquestionably in love with each other.

This being in love when one or the other, or

both, are, so to speak, involved in a *status quo*, is a funny business. It is an extremely sensitive, and at times may be a violently awkward, condition. All the little things of life seem to mean so much. All the big things of life seem to mean so little.

A lot of things are done before either one side or the other declares the state of his or her mind. Declarations in fact—or promises, too, for that matter—are skirted about with all the precaution of children beating a bag to drive out a rat. Both are considerably afraid of the moment when it will rush out.

Being a man of honour—which, without exception, all men are—Ansell had told her nothing of the exorbitant and relentless passion she had brought into his life. Being a married woman, Mrs. Loring was continually reminding herself of that gentle little man who, though he never bothered her with his affection, she knew would never recover from the shock of finding that her affection had left him.

“Whatever happens, I must be fair to him,” she told herself; and, as fairness in these matters is different from any other fairness that prevails in sport or business or any other procedure in life whatsoever, she had neither told Ansell that she loved him nor had she allowed her lips to touch his.

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She had kissed him once on the forehead, but that is not the same thing. The kiss upon the lips is reckoned to be dangerous. One never knows how long it will last. Next to an open declaration of love, it is the most irretrievable of all admissions. After the kiss upon the lips a complete entanglement is almost certain to follow. But not quite. People have been known to get out of the ravelling even after that. It must be a complicated figure of the cat's cradle when you come to look at it. But it has been done.

Ansell and Mrs. Loring had not got as far as that. As has been admitted, she had kissed him on the forehead. You can take that how you like. Some people regard it merely as a form of blessing. He had felt the scent she wore all about him. His cheek had brushed against her cheek as she had drawn his forehead down to her lips. That was in her drawing-room. She had held out her hand then and said "Good-bye!" quickly, before he could decide whether it was more than a blessing or not.

At their next meeting he had held her hand. That was in a taxi. Her hand was lying on her knee. It seemed to be lying there for that purpose. Quite unaware of the discovery, he found that it was.

Later he had kissed her hand. This was in a

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cinema. She had educated him to an appreciation of cinemas.

It had all come to that point when a man wants to know where he is. Men are so direct. It had all come to that point when a woman will do her damnedest—if the expression is not too clear—to escape from what she does know.

Mrs. Loring asked him to meet her one morning and come to Maple's.

"I want," said she, over the telephone to his room in Cork Street, "I want nothing less than a domestic bed for a domestic servant. We can lunch in one of those funny little places afterwards."

A young gentleman, infinitely better dressed than Gerald Ansell, escorted them into the bed and bedding department. With a wave of his hand at the entrance to the showroom he exposed to their view, as it were, so many beds as made life seem either indecent or a mere nightmare, whichever way you happened to look at it.

"Does madam want a double or a single bed?" he asked, and there was that dispassionateness in his tone as suggested they were one and the same thing.

"Single," said Mrs. Loring; "it's for a servant."

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By some process of mind, which doubtless is quite simple if you will only put yourself into a salesman's shoes—this is not obligatory—the young gentleman assumed that it was merely the opening gambit of a large order to follow. Probably his experience of human nature had led him to anticipate that this was only the timid prelude to the requirements of a whole house furnishing for a newly married couple. He may have known of people beginning by ordering a pair of salt-cellars and ending up with a double four-poster bed. It is impossible to know a salesman's point of view unless one is a salesman and has been one all one's life. Whatever may have been the argument upon which he proceeded, he said:

"Perhaps madam will choose the other beds afterwards. We have an excellent selection of antique copies and modern designs in any size madam requires."

Ansell was not quite aware of what possessed him. Either it was an acute sense of humour, or it was some deeper motive, the subtlety of which was beyond him. Whichever it was, he said:

"Yes, let's see the single bed first."

She cast one glance at him. It was not in approval. She saw nothing funny in a salesman's point of view. Without another word she selected

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the single bed, and was for going out of the shop at once, whether to lunch in one of those funny little places or not it is impossible to say.

Not so the salesman.

Turning to Ansell, in whom he doubtless felt a certain bond of sympathy—he wore a signet ring on the third finger of his left hand, a signet ring with presumably his own crest on it—he said:

“Would madam like to see—a—a better class of bed now?”

“Yes,” said Ansell; “let’s see a better class of bed.”

A sense of humour is the guarantee of sensibility. Mrs. Loring turned on her heel and refused to play this last figure of the cat’s cradle just for the mere fun of the thing, and Gerald Ansell was quite satisfied as to where he was. When a woman cannot pretend she is on her honeymoon and out on the adventure of furnishing the new home, it is not a new home she wants, but the old one.

The salesman looked at Ansell as he turned to follow her. He looked at Ansell, then he stooped and picked up a piece of string off the floor.

He picked up a piece of string, and, without thinking what he was doing, he tied a knot and made a common loop of it.

DAYLIGHT ROBBERY

I

IN 1913 John Gaunt was sentenced to five years' penal servitude for robbery. It was his first offence. The heavy sentence was only justified by the clever and calculated deliberation with which the crime was committed. It involved the stealing of jewelry to the value of many hundreds of pounds, all of which John Gaunt got away with, and the proceeds of which he enjoyed for some months before the crime was traced to him. The covering of his tracks was no less cleverly planned than the actual robbery itself.

The fact that the motive for the theft was to assist his mother, who was in debt, was not considered as any mitigation by the judge. When the barrister for the defence pointed out that, having relieved his mother—who was quite ignorant of the way the money had been obtained—of her liabilities, John Gaunt spent the money with generosity, the judge lowered his head and looked over the top of his spectacles at the lawyer.

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"I have never discovered anyone, Mr. Ganthon," he said, "who found it difficult to be generous with other people's money."

Mr. Ganthon left that point. For the rest of his speech, he confined himself to the previous record of the prisoner and concluded by an unemotional but eloquent appeal to the jury to consider the future of this young man who for one lapse from honesty might have to pay a heavy toll for the rest of his life.

John Gaunt was sentenced to five years' penal servitude. He took his sentence as a man of spirit takes a blow in the face when he is tied hands and feet. He winced. He swallowed hastily, though his mouth was quite dry. He looked at the judge, as a man looks at fork lightning, a thing whose power he appreciates but whose origin of force he cannot understand. Then he disappeared.

Shortly after the trial, Mrs. Gaunt died. She had been left in extreme want. The neighbours about her had given her the cold shoulder. There was some inevitable talk about her being cognizant of the whole affair. When her son was lost to her in one of His Majesty's prisons, she turned her face to the wall. In diagnosing the case, the doctor said she died from sheer want of volition to live.

John Gaunt was informed of her death in the

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Governor's room. The Governor was one of those men who regarded crime as a disease. In the privacy of his own mind, that is to say, unknown to the authorities, he upheld the belief that crime is a sickness of the moral fibre, induced in some by sheer perversion of will, and in others caught as a physical disease is caught by mere accident of contact of circumstance. Briefly, he considered that there was good and bad in most people, just as there was good and bad health; that a man was not necessarily to be treated as a pariah because he had committed a crime, any more than because he had contracted consumption. He approved of capital punishment because, as he said, it was the most merciful and swiftest way out of a contrary and exacting world. He took a personal interest in a condemned man and endeavoured to impress this point of view upon him during the brief time before execution. Those who stayed longer, he treated as human beings. He had the respect, common in prisons, for a convict serving a sentence of penal servitude, and showed them infinitely more human consideration than the petty law-breakers who appear again and again for a month at a time and make use of the prison as a pauper does of the workhouse.

The Governor sent for John Gaunt.

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"Can you bear a bit of bad news?" he asked him.

Gaunt looked at him a moment and then said: "My mother's dead, sir."

"That's it," replied the Governor. "You can keep to your cell to-day if you like."

"I'd sooner go on with my work, sir."

"Right," said the Governor and held out his hand. Gaunt shook it and went away.

In his house at lunch that morning the Governor told his wife that John Gaunt's mother was dead. She knew most of the prisoners by name. She knew their history. The Governor's attitude towards crime inclined her to the idea that the prison was merely a hospital for moral accidents. She could not have lived in such close proximity to mental suffering had she adopted the authorities' point of view. She thought of the execution shed as of a lethal chamber.

"They ought to have a lethal chamber in every hospital," said the Governor. Every day on which there was an execution in the prison, he said that. It helped his wife in her going about the house until the newspapers had left the matter alone.

"Have you told John Gaunt?" she asked.

"Yes."

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“ How did he take it ? ”

“ Straight between the eyes and then went back to his work.”

“ I’m sure,” said she, “ that a man like that would never commit another offence.”

“ Quite possibly,” he replied.

“ Well—how many times doesn’t one say, ‘ I’d steal if it came to that,’ when you think about someone you care for being in distress and you have no means of helping them ? Wouldn’t you steal for me if I were starving ? ”

“ Mrs. Gaunt wasn’t starving,” said the Governor.

“ No, but she was in debt. She couldn’t pay her debts. Her son couldn’t pay them for her. It was only the circumstance, it wasn’t an innate desire to steal.”

“ Theft is a crime,” answered the Governor. There were occasions with his wife when he had to speak as one of the authorities. Women winged an idea with emotion and let it fly away with them. She had seen John Gaunt and liked his face. “ Crime, like disease,” said he, “ has to be stamped out. Punishment is a deterrent, like vaccination. It prevents others from catching it.”

“ Then why isn’t the Government vaccin-

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ated?" she inquired. "If the Labour Party gets in and we have Socialism all round, they'll take everything we have."

"A thief steals from someone," said he. "Governments steal from everyone. The difference is in scale and degree."

"The moral effect is just the same," said she.

The Governor went back to the board-room to examine a new batch of prisoners.

"I must get on with my job," he said.

II

In 1916 they were wanting men badly on the Western Front. Nations were killing each other on a large scale. The eye of the authorities fell upon the prisons. They were full of young men who might as well be losing their lives as spending the tax-payers' money.

The Governor sat in the board-room listening to a gentleman in a red hat and highly polished leggings, who interviewed a number of men passed by the doctor into the A class. They were ushered through a door from the unknown beyond into a small railed dock at the end of the room. The Governor and his clerk, the gentle-

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man in a red hat and another officer, sat at the table and smoked cigarettes.

Each man as he appeared through the door into the railed dock, looked like a jack-in-the-box, set free by the agency of a hidden spring.

"Give your name," said a warder in as automatic a voice as the squeak which accompanies that engaging contrivance. A child would have been fascinated by the proceedings.

Having heard his name, the Governor asked him one or two questions relating to his crime and conviction. Then the gentleman in the red hat put before him a specious proposition.

"Through the clemency of His Majesty's Government," he said, "I have come here to offer you your freedom. If you are willing to go out and fight for your country, you can leave the prison to-morrow and your sentence from that moment will be wiped out. Thousands of men, enjoying their freedom, have voluntarily joined the service. It is open to you by the generosity of the Government to become a hero like any one of them. What have you got to say?"

Had the gentleman in the red hat been concerned with the study of human nature, he would have learnt much from the answers he received.

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One man shrewdly asked if we were losing the War. Another said : " What's the matter with this place, sir ? "

" What's the matter with it ! " echoed the gentleman of the red hat. " It's a prison, where all your freedom as a man is taken from you. I'm offering you your freedom."

" Excuse me, sir, but this freedom what you talks about—I don't think much of it."

" You don't think much of it ! "

" No, sir." He was impervious to irony. " Yer see, what I means is this. You've got to 'ave yer brain-box well stocked to keep it when you've got it. You've got to always be on the look-out, if yer follers me what I mean. I ain't sharp enough. I've come to the conclusion, it's easier just waitin' till yer comes out than what it is bein' out and puzzlin' yer wits, terri-fyin' yerself so to speak, so as not to get in. Last time I thought I'd stay out for a bit. My ole missus was gettin' fair sick of my bein' jugged. She kep on at me so, arstin' me what I was doin' 'ere and what I was doin' there, that I got fed up with freedom as yer calls it, and I give you my word, sir, I was fair glad to be back again."

" How many convictions has this man had ? " asked the gentleman in khaki.

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“ Ten,” said the Governor behind his hand.

“ Send him away ! ” said the red hat.

He disappeared like a rabbit down a hole. The door closed on him. A moment later it opened again.

“ Give your name,” said the warder.

“ John Gaunt.”

The Governor watched him while the red hat advanced his specious proposition.

“ I suppose I go into the ranks ? ” said Gaunt.

“ Did you think you’d go into an Officer’s Training Corps ? ” asked the red hat.

“ No, sir. I meant the fighting ranks. I wasn’t afraid you’d make an officer of me. I was only afraid I might find myself put on to wash up in a mess or clean out latrines.”

“ Particular, are you ? ”

“ No, sir. Not exactly. Only if I’m going out, I’d like to go out for something worth while.”

“ Perhaps you don’t consider fighting for your country worth while.”

The Governor watched John Gaunt swallow something in his throat before he answered. With an effort he replied quietly that he did.

“ Then you volunteer ? ”

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"I should like to ask one question, sir."

"I suppose you've heard of looking a gift horse in the mouth!"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

"Do I join the ranks as coming out of prison? Do the other fellows know I've been serving a sentence here?"

"Certainly not. You'll be under extra supervision, of course, but the men and officers in the regiment will know nothing about it, and when the War's over you'll be a free man to pursue what course of life you like. Does that appeal to your sense of fairness?"

Again John Gaunt swallowed something. His voice was extremely quiet as he replied it did.

"You can see the recruiting officer then."

John Gaunt disappeared.

"He fancies himself," said the red hat.

"Some men do," said the Governor. "Even in prison. It's not so easy as you'd imagine to destroy essential beliefs."

III

In 1919 Captain Gaunt, M.C., D.S.O., came out of the army with a high record for bravery

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and exceptional ability. The C.O. of the regiment did his best to persuade him to join the regular forces. When Gaunt said he preferred civil life, he meant he preferred the freedom of the individual to the certified licence of the official.

Notwithstanding he had risen from the ranks, he had made many friends in the regiment. As he discussed the advantages of joining the regular forces with the Colonel, there was a letter in his pocket inviting him to make his headquarters at Peter Hollis's place in Warwickshire as soon as he was demobbed. Explaining his friendship with Hollis, Gaunt would say :

“ We were chucked a bit together out in France.”

Hollis had another version. In the comradeship one man can give another at such a time, Hollis made it out to his people that Gaunt had saved his life.

“ When it comes to thinking the only thing left is to fill your pockets with Mills's hand-grenades and slip over to the enemy trenches on a dark night, you want something more than a neat one to pull you together.”

It was an emotional version. Hollis, then, was that sort.

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Juniper, Hollis's sister, took after her father, as Gaunt discovered when he arrived at Morton Magnates. From both Sir William and Lady Hollis his welcome was spontaneous. However emotional Peter's version may have been, they accepted it. The iron strain in Sir William which had hardened when he first heard it was considerably tempered by meeting John Gaunt. Knowing he had come from the ranks, he looked at him sharply, and receiving as straight a look in return had given his hand with a frank admission of welcome.

With Juniper it was different. The iron was not tempered in her. He met it, a blade in her eyes, like the sword of the angel guarding the gateway of Eden. So far he might approach her as their guest at Morton Magnates. No farther. He was to learn by gradual observation and occasional converse the independence of her sex in the modern girl.

His first inclination was not to return to Morton Magnates. He had spent four days there in a consciousness of Juniper's indifference that outweighed the genial welcome of his host and hostess. He held to that inclination for a fortnight and then found himself returning one Saturday with Hollis in the train,

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unable to satisfy his mind as to why he was doing it.

Directly he saw Juniper again, he knew. She was sitting on the lawn under the big tulip tree in full bloom that is known through the whole county, when he came out into the garden. She looked up with a "Hullo" as he came towards her and then went on reading her book. He knew then. He wanted to steal her for himself. He acknowledged it would be theft. If they knew his story, there could be no justification under heaven to warrant their consent. It was theft. He stood there looking down at her still reading, in the same manner as he had stood looking in the jeweller's window, debating what he should take and how best he might take it.

"The man who secures your consideration will have to commit daylight robbery," said he.

She looked up quickly.

"How did you know that?" she asked.

"You put a high value on yourself."

"Not without reason, I hope," she smiled.

"No—with the very best reason in the world. But there's very little money about these days. And now that the War's over

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there'll be a rush of crime. When people can't buy they steal."

"Don't tell me you believe the highwayman still exists."

"It's only the highway that's altered," said he, "and the conveyance that's changed. There'll always be a man with a mask over his eyes and a brace of pistols in his belt."

"Oh—do introduce me to him!" she laughed.

He had acquired the necessary implement. This was the first time she had given him her laughter. From that moment he began to prise a way to her interest.

Taking valuables out of a jeweller's window was child's play to this. His concealment was the frank openness with which he did it. Daylight robbery and no mistake. But to have made love to her would have been to snatch at his object with the hope that his heels would carry him to safety. He wanted her too much to rely on that. With the same care and deliberation as before, he hid his tracks behind a guise of indifference as complete as her own. And day by day she came nearer to him.

At last the moment seemed to have come when he could step out on the highway, a

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masked man to her, and call out for her hands to be held up. He came down from London to Morton Magnates on the Friday. Peter Hollis was following the next day with a friend for the week-end.

John and Juniper went for a ride that afternoon. For some weeks past she had expected him to make love to her when she could have laughed at him standing there, out in the high-road with his mask discarded like all the rest of his sex. But his indifference had beaten her. He had laughed at these emotions between the sexes. Time for that sort of thing, he said, was over.

"If we had another flood and were delivered high and dry on Mount Ararat would you think it a feasible proposition to begin peopling the world all over again? They say, 'No, siree,' in America. I don't know what it means, but it sounds like the proper answer."

Peter arrived the next day with his friend. The moment John saw him across the lawn, taking tea under the tulip tree as he and Juniper returned from a day on the river, he knew the moment of the chase was close at hand. With daylight robbery, where everybody can see what you are doing, there is usually one to have

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suspicion and cry "Stop thief" as you get away. It does not matter. The confusion of the chase is often to your advantage. Here, without doubt, was the one to cry—"Stop thief." In Peter's friend, with a sudden jolt of his memory, John recognized the red hat before whom, with his close cropped hair, he had stood like a jack-in-the-box in 1916.

There was no immediate recognition in the red hat's eye when they were introduced. But through tea-time and still more closely at dinner that night, he looked quickly and then again at John.

The ladies rose to go into the drawing-room. Admitting herself wholly beaten, Juniper had said :

"The garden I think on a night like this. If I'm not spreading my skirts in the drawing-room, you'd better come and look for me."

All that remained of her indifference was her casual drawl. The cool insolence of it only gave him more meaning in her words. They flashed like fishes turning under the still surface of a pool. She let him see them flash and then sauntered away after the others.

The red hat was watching them. As the door closed, he changed his place from the other

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side of the table and came to sit next to John.

"Haven't I met you before, somewhere?" he asked.

John's eye was as cool as Juniper's voice.

"Probably—were you out in France?"

"Off and on."

"In the trenches?"

"No—I was on headquarters staff. I had a job in the War Office."

"Not likely we should have met out there then," said John. "P'raps it'll come back to you. Expect you met a good few and didn't know many."

"Recruits," said the red hat—"damned exhausting."

"Ah!" said John sympathetically.

From the open window of the drawing-room, John saw Juniper's green dress out on the lawn, a thin block of jade set with night blue. She could see inside the room from there. He let her watch for ten minutes.

"The deliberate coolness of this theft," the judge had said in 1913, "makes me regard it in no light manner as a first offence. He seems to have kept his head in every emergency. Nothing flustered him. From the way this

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robbery was planned and carried out, he might have been an old hand. A man with this ingenuity and intelligence for crime is a danger to the community."

After ten minutes, John met Juniper in the garden.

"In no hurry—were you?" said she.

"How do you know?"

"Saw you standing passing the time of night with Lady Brenner."

She had watched. They walked across the lawn in silence. He admitted the possibility of mistake, but he could have believed it intentional when her shoulder brushed against his arm. Then she said :

"Your indifference is colossal—isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," said he. "I'm amazed at it myself sometimes."

"Aren't you even aware it's a lovely night?"

"Oh, yes—we had lovely nights like this out in France. I'm suspicious of lovely nights."

They sat down on chairs that had been left out under the tulip tree.

"Here's what's hiding behind this lovely night," he said suddenly, and told her about John Gaunt from the beginning. "Shall I

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go on?" he said from time to time. She nodded her head, and when it came to the verdict and sentence, she put out her hand. It was daylight robbery.

"Then out to France in the ranks—up to the front line—that's all——"

"That's where it begins," she said.

"Oh—no—that's all. You could get the rest from anyone of 'em who've come back. Out to France—that's the end of it."

"How about Morton Magnates?"

He stood up.

"You can tell me about that," said he, "when you've had a night's sleep." And he left her. He walked straight across the lawn to the house. To have stayed then and listened to her, to have stayed and told her all he knew himself, would have been to count the swag before he got it home. He knew more about things than that. He had too much ingenuity and intelligence for crime. He was more dangerous to her walking across the lawn there, saying nothing, disappearing into the house with her eyes searching after him through the darkness.

The red hat was in the smoking-room. He half rose out of his seat as John came in, then sat back again, then stood up.

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"Anywhere where we could have a talk?" he said.

"Hundreds of places," said John.

The garden seemed to be indicated. Across the lawn under the tulip tree, Juniper's green dress now looked like a clump of lilies. There was re-assurance in its stillness.

"I'm a great friend of the Hollis family," said the red hat.

"Nice people," said John.

"Naturally I feel a sense of duty about 'em."

"Duty's a fine thing."

The red hat looked quickly and merely saw imperturbability. He went on.

"I've been thinking over meeting you before."

"Yes."

"I've got it now."

"Good. Beastly sensation when you find a face and can't discover its name."

"Do you remember 1916?"

"Heavens! Who wouldn't?"

"Do you remember the board-room in His Majesty's prison?"

"Give your name! John Gaunt! Yes. You were the red hat, were you?"

"Pretty cool—aren't you?"

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"I'm not uncomfortable with it."

"Do Sir William and Lady Hollis know?"

"I fancy not. I've had no reason to tell them as yet."

The red hat rattled some keys and money as though he needed to express his agitation.

"Don't you think you'd better say your farewells on Monday morning?"

"Why?"

"Why? Do you consider yourself fit to be here? To be a friend of Miss Hollis?"

"I was passed A1," said John, "I was fit enough then. I don't think I've lost in condition."

"You mean you're in love with Miss Hollis?"

"I haven't said so."

"No—but I gather you've said so to her. I heard her to-night as the ladies went out. She asked you to come out into the garden. I've known Juniper—Miss Hollis—quite a few years. She's not the sort of girl to unbend like that unless she's letting a chap make love to her."

"Evidently you have reason to fret," said John. "I've only known her a few months."

"Not been wasting your time then."

"Why not ask her about that? I wouldn't

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dare to flatter myself by suggesting that she might think I had."

"All the same I presume now you'll go on Monday."

"Why?"

"Because it wouldn't be comfortable for you to remain."

John smiled for the first time.

"You'd tell them?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"When the War's over—don't say you've forgotten this—you'll be a free man to pursue what course of life you like. And then if I remember, you asked me if that appealed to my sense of fairness. Doesn't it still appeal to yours?"

The red hat snorted.

"The War's over," he said.

"Quite."

"We return to our old standards."

"Ah, but that's such a big mistake," said John. "There'll be a lot of crime before we do that. You can't legalize murder and robbery on a large scale without upsetting the standard. What will you do if I don't say my farewells on Monday?"

"I shall tell Miss Hollis," said the red hat.

"It'll be interesting," said John, "to hear what she says."

GANTHONY'S WIFE

THE custom of telling stories round the fire on Christmas Eve is dying out, like letter-writing and all the amateur domestic arts of the last century. Our stories are told us by professionals and broadcast to thousands by the printing machine. We give our letters to a dictaphone or a stenographer. The personal touch is going out of life, if it has not already gone. In an age where every conceivable machine is invented to save time and labour, we have no time to spare for these things. We are too exhausted from working our machines to give them our attention.

We were saying all this last year as we sat round a blazing wood fire at that little house-party the Stennings give every Christmas in that Tudor house of theirs on the borders of Kent and Sussex.

The children had gone to bed. There were five of us grown-ups left round the broad open fire-place where huge oak logs were burning on the glowing heart of a pile of silver ashes that had been red-hot for a week or more.

Ganthony's Wife

Miss Valerie Brett, the actress, was sitting inside the chimney corner warming first one toe, then the other. She comes there every Christmas. The children love her. She can make funny noises with her mouth. Also by facial contortion, she can look like Queen Victoria on the heads of all the pennies that ever were minted. In a semi-circle outside we sat, the rest of us, Stenning and his wife, Northanger and myself, smoking our various smokes and sipping that punch, the secret of which Stenning learnt from an old wine merchant in Winthrop Street, Cork. I think he relies on it to secure the few select guests he always has at his Christmas parties.

“Come down for Christmas. Punch.”

This is a common form of his invitation.

We had been playing games with the children, hide-and-seek being the most popular. We were all a bit exhausted. It was Mrs. Stenning who opened the discussion by complaining that there was no one qualified to tell children ghost stories nowadays.

“We had a man here last Christmas,” she said, “and he began one, but the children guessed the end of it before it was half-way through.”

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"Bless 'em," said Miss Brett.

"It was a rotten story, anyhow," said Stenning. "You can't make a mystery now by just rattling a chain and slamming a door and blowing out the candle. When the candle went out, young John said, 'Why didn't he shut the window?' Our amiable story teller assured John that he did, but he wasn't convincing about it, because Emily said, "'Spect it was like that window up in my bedroom. The wind comes through there when it's shut and blows the curtains about?'"

Mrs. Stenning sighed.

"I suppose they know too much," she said—"and all I've done, you don't know, to try and keep them simple."

"They don't know too much," said Northanger. "It's more likely we who know too little. We don't believe in the rattling chain and the extinguished candle ourselves. We've been laughing at them for the last twenty years, and they've caught up with us."

"Do you mean this civilization's at the end of its evolution?" I asked.

"Either that," said he, "or we're in one of those hanging pauses, like a switchback when it gets to the top of a crest and just crawls over

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the top till it gathers a fresh impetus to rise to a higher crest. It's only the pessimists who say we're finished. Shedding an old skin is a proper process of nature. There are signs of the old skin going."

Northanger is a queer chap. He talks very little. This was voluble for him. As usually happens with a man like that, we listened.

"What signs?" asked Miss Brett.

"All sorts," said he. "There's even a new ghost. I saw one last Christmas."

"You saw one?"

Two or three of us spoke at once.

"I saw one," he repeated.

If a man like Northanger admits to seeing a ghost, we felt there must be something in it. It would not be a mere turnip head with a candle inside.

"Why didn't you tell us when the children were here?" asked Mrs. Stenning immediately.

"It's not a story for children," he replied. "Though I don't know why it shouldn't be. They wouldn't understand it, and that's the first quality required of a ghost story."

"Tell us."

This was practically simultaneous from everybody. Miss Brett pulled her feet up on to the

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chimney-corner seat. Stenning slipped over to the table and brought round the punch bowl to fill our glasses. I say—slipped over—because he moved like a man who does not want to disturb an atmosphere. Somehow that chap Northanger had put a grip on us. We felt he knew that what he was going to tell us was unknowable. He had indeed created an atmosphere, the atmosphere that Stenning was careful not to disturb. There was the proper sort of hush in the air while he was filling our glasses. No one had lit the lights since we have been playing at hide-and-seek. We were all grouped around the light of the fire. Then Northanger began.

“Do any of you know Ganthony—Ganthonys a tea planter in Ceylon?”

None of us did.

“Well—that makes it better,” said he. Then he looked across at Miss Brett. “You and I haven’t met before, Miss Brett,” he said, “till our good friends brought us together this Christmas. I’ve seen you on the stage, but not being one of those admirers who have the courage to offer their congratulations without introduction, you haven’t seen me till now.”

In that prelude, I suddenly had a glimpse

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of Northanger's way with women, an odd sardonic sort of way, too subtle for most of them, but conveying with it an impression that he was not unsusceptible.

She smiled as he continued :

" In case our good friends haven't told you then," he went on, " it's necessary to say I'm a bachelor. I have rooms in Stretton Street, Piccadilly. I've been there seventeen years. When they pull down Devonshire House, they pull me off my perch. That'll be the end of Stretton Street. I don't mean my going. But without the restraining influence of the Baroness Burdett-Coutts and the Duke of Devonshire, Stretton Street will become anybody's street. A cinema theatre in those new buildings they are going to put up on the site of Devonshire House will send Stretton Street to the dogs. It's like that with people. Ninety per cent. of us live by example. However, my story's about Ganthony.

" It was last Christmas. I mean 1923. I was staying in town. I often do. I like London on Christmas Day."

Miss Brett shuddered.

" Yes—I know," said Northanger. " London seems dead to lots of people when the shops are

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shut, and the theatres are closed. It doesn't get me like that. It seems alive to me."

"What with?" It was Mrs. Stenning who asked this.

"With the spirits of people. We were talking about ghosts. Well, how could you expect a ghost to clank a chain when the rattle of motor buses would drown the noise of it out of existence? What's the good of blowing out candles when the streets are daylight with night signs? There's one thing I always do when I'm in London on Christmas Day. I go to my club. It used to be one of the old gaming houses before the Regency. Modern interior decoration has hidden all that, but on Christmas Day, when some of the rooms are absolutely empty, they come back, the old gamesters. You can feel them about you. Imagination, I know—but who has properly defined what imagination is? Memory's impulse of association isn't good enough. Where does the impulse come from?

"I always go to my club. I went there that afternoon and to my amazement found Ganthony in the smoking-room writing letters. Ganthony is one of those men who belong to a London club and appear in it, somewhat like

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a comet, at rare intervals. Suddenly he walks in, gets his letters from the hall porter, fills a waste-paper basket with the accumulated rubbish, and writes a pile of answers. For the next week or so you can find him practically at any moment on the premises. Then one day, you say to the hall porter, 'Mr. Ganthonys in the club?' 'Mr. Ganthonys, sir? He's gone.'

"Perhaps as much as three years go by before you see him again. That Christmas Day I hadn't seen him for four years at least. He was surrounded with letters and was writing for all he was worth. I think he was as glad to see me as I was to see him. He'd just come home from Ceylon—didn't know how long he was going to stay. He never does. I picked out a comfortable chair and we talked. Presently I inquired about his wife, whether he'd brought her with him—how she was. His eyes went like pebbles when the water's dried off them.

"'My wife died nearly a year ago,' said he.

"I must tell you about Ganthonys wife. He had met and married her during the War. But the War had nothing to do with it. We've got into the habit of putting those hurried marriages down to the War. Whenever they'd

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met, Ganthony would have married her. It was the case of a man meeting the fate that was in store for him and rushing to it like a bit of steel to a magnet. What he had meant to her I've never been able quite to satisfy my mind about. The relationships that circumstance contrives between individuals must have some sort of scheme about them. But I'm blowed if it's possible to begin to think what it is or how it's regulated.

"Ganthonay met her in a restaurant. He'd just come out of hospital. Been knocked out by a shell burst on Vimy Ridge. His face had been cut about and was still all wrapped in bandages. One side of his face was fairly clear —on the other, his eye just peeped out of a mass of lint. He didn't care what he looked like. In fact I think it rather amused him to go and dine in public. He went alone.

"She was dining at a table a few yards away with a man. Like everyone else she was attracted by the sight of this bandaged face of Ganthonay's. She drew her companion's attention. I had all this from Ganthonay himself just before he was married. It was as though she said, 'They've been knocking him about —haven't they?'

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"The man looked at him for a moment or two. Wounded men were pretty common those days. He was a soldier himself. He was in khaki. He took no more notice. But the woman went on looking. Every other second Ganthony caught her eye. More than that, he could see she didn't want her companion to notice it. Something about it intrigued Ganthony. The scheme, whatever it is, was beginning to work. The fate was beginning to draw him. He smiled—so far as that was possible with half his face in bandages. She smiled in return—one of those smiles a woman can hide from everyone but the person for whom it is intended. In a few minutes they were talking to each other with their eyes, that sort of conversation that isn't hampered with the expression and meaning of mere words.

"Ganthony cut a course out and finished his meal before they did. He ordered his bill when she was looking at him. He paid it, looked at the door, then at her, then he got up and went out. He hadn't to wait more than two seconds before she was outside on the pavement beside him. She'd made some excuse to her companion. She had for decency's sake to go back and finish her dinner. They arranged to meet later.

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"They were married in a week. No need to tell you more than that. You can put it down to the War if you like. But Ganthonny wasn't the sort of man to marry that sort of woman just because there was a war on. He did it with his eyes open even if his face was bandaged. He knew the kind she was. He knew he wasn't the first, but I suppose he may have thought that when he took her out to Ceylon after he was quit of the War, he would be the last. I never thought so. But it was no good telling him that. When a man runs into his fate as he did, platitudes and speculations about morals don't stop him. He has to find things out for himself. God disposes sometimes, it seems to me before and after a man's proposal.

"Anyhow that's as much as it has to do with this story. Ganthonny had married and now his wife was dead. I confess to a feeling of satisfaction when I heard it. She was a beautiful woman no doubt—intensely attractive. I had never seen her, but he had sent me a snapshot of himself and her from Ceylon after they got out there. However, attraction isn't everything. It invites, but it doesn't always entertain."

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"It doesn't sound very much like a ghost story," said Mrs. Stenning.

Northanger apologized.

"I warned you it wasn't a ghost story for children," said he. "I told you they wouldn't understand it. I doubt if I understand it myself."

"Shove a log on, Valerie," said Stenning, "and don't interrupt him, Grace. The man's earning his punch with me anyhow. Go on, Northanger. You tell it your own way. Women always want to see the last page. Ganthony's wife was dead."

"Yes—dead," Northanger went on. "Ganthony saw her dead. They had lived in Colombo for the first six or eight months and apparently in that short time, he came to know how attractive she was. And yet, it was not only her physical attraction for men, he told me, as a sort of fatality about her that drew them as it had drawn him.

"Apparently he knew nothing in fact. She was not so much secretive about it, as almost mysterious. As far as I can make out, it was as though she had a vocation for that sort of life, like the sacred women in the temple of Osiris at Thebes. I can imagine her having

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been extraordinarily mysterious with that other man in the restaurant when she first met Ganthonny. She must have just slipped away from him when that dinner was over. At one moment he may have thought she was his for the evening. The next she was gone.

"It was the beginning of that feeling in Ganthonny that at any moment he might lose her, made him leave Colombo and take her up country to a spot close to his plantations. She made no complaint. It was not as though she were a gay woman and were being torn away from her gaiety. She went without a word. He was terribly fond of her. Any fool could have seen that. Notwithstanding the way he had met her, it had not continued to be promiscuous with him. She was a sacred woman to him right enough. He told me about her death, in that slow, measured sort of way as a man walks at the end of a journey. Whatever she'd been, her death had left a wound in his life that wouldn't heal in a hurry."

"Are we to hear how she did die?" I asked.

"Yes—I want to hear how she died," said Miss Brett.

"I'm coming to that," said Northanger.

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"Away there up country, Ganthony felt she was safe. Except down at the plantations, there were no Englishmen about. After a few months up there, when she seemed to be quite contented, Ganthony had to go down to Colombo on business. He was gone three days. When he came back, she was gone. The native servants were in a panic. He scoured the country for two days. They'd heard nothing of her down at the plantations. She'd vanished—slipped away. On the third day, coming back after a fruitless search, he found a Buddhist priest waiting for him at his bungalow. All the man would say was, 'I've come to bring you to see the memsahib.' Ganthony followed him. Again and again he asked the fellow what was the matter, threatened him, tried to frighten him, but he'd say nothing except—'You shall see the memsahib.'

"On the side of a hill about three miles from Ganthony's bungalow, there was a Buddhist monastery. He was taken there and there on a rough sort of bed in one of the rooms—it was a rest place—he found his wife lying—dead. There was no question of getting a doctor. There was not a doctor within miles.

"I asked him if he was sure she was dead,

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and he turned those stone eyes of his on me.

“ ‘ You have to be your own doctor out there,’ said he, ‘ and there are one or two things you can’t fail to recognize. Death’s one of ’em. She’d been dead some time. She was quite cold. There’s no mistaking when the spirit’s gone out of the body. Hers was gone. I could feel it had. She lay there, just a dead body, and I felt I couldn’t touch her then—it seemed repulsive without her spirit.’

“ I asked him how she got there, what he thought she’d died of, how long he imagined she’d been dead. None of his answers were very elaborate. He made it out to be fever. She had walked by herself into the monastery. She must have been dead two days. He arrived at that decision apart from what the monks told him.

“ Then he said an extraordinary thing which made me realize the repulsion he had felt for that body bereft of its spirit.

“ ‘ I left her there,’ said he—‘ they buried her.’

“ Well, that was Ganthonny’s story as he told it me that Christmas afternoon in the club. We had tea together while we talked. After

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that he went back to finish his letters. I went into the reading-room till about a quarter to seven. It was snowing then, coming down like a white fog over the black darkness outside. There was hardly a taxi moving in the streets. I'd ordered my dinner for eight o'clock at my rooms. I went out of the reading-room to make a move towards Stretton Street and then I thought of Ganthony, probably dining there in the club by himself. I looked into the smoking-room and asked him to come along. He pushed his hand through his bundle of letters.

"' Only half finished,' said he.

"' Finish 'em to-morrow.'

"' No,' he said, 'I'll get 'em done now while I'm at it. If I get finished before ten. I'll look in and have a drink with you. But no more raising from the dead. That's buried.'

" I nodded my head. It was plain he wasn't coming. When a man wants to do a thing, he does it without ifs and buts. Those are feminine prerogatives. I left him to his letters. I walked out of the club, pushed my way through that white storm across the black gape of Trafalgar Square, up the Haymarket, and turned off into Jermyn Street.

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“ I always think Jermyn Street is a queer street. I’ve known odd men living there, in little rooms over little shops. It keeps an atmosphere about it which the rest of London is losing as fast as a woman loses self-respect directly she takes to drink. It has dark, sunken doorways. The houses are so close together that you hardly ever look up at the windows as you pass along its narrow thoroughfare. I never used to think of the existence of those windows till an odd chap I knew invited me to his rooms there. There was something so queer about them that after that, I spent a morning walking along the north side of Jermyn Street looking up at the houses on the opposite side. They’re nearly all of them funny. They’re hiding places. And the street itself has got that feeling. So much has it got it, that it is one of the favourite walking places of that band of sisters who count the world well lost for—why shouldn’t they call it love ?

“ I never expected to see one of them that night. There wasn’t a soul anywhere. The snow was coming down like a muslin curtain of a big design. A policeman passed me. His footsteps and mine were silent in the snow. I wished him a happy Christmas as I went by.

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His answer was like the voice of a man with a respirator on. The snow had dressed him in white. He just appeared and disappeared.

“I was getting near the St. James’s end, just about where old Cox’s Hotel used to stand, when through that muslin curtain of snow, just as through the curtains you can dimly see someone moving about inside a room, I saw a figure coming towards me. I felt a moment’s surprise. It was a woman.

“There were not many steps for us to approach each other before we met. With that snow the whole of London was cramped up into the dimensions of a narrow, little room. As we passed, it was just as though she had pulled the curtains for an instant and looked through the window at me. Then, like the policeman, she was gone.”

It might have been the instinct of a raconteur to heighten the suspense, but here Northanger stopped and looked at Valerie Brett.

“Go on,” we said.

“Well,” said he, “I’m considering this young lady’s feelings. To give you the proper impression of what happened, I have to be what the novelists call—psychological here. Will she mind?”

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"Don't be an ass," said Stenning. "You know jolly well you're only trying to tantalize us. Go on with your psychology. She's on the stage. They're full of psychology there."

"I only felt it necessary," said Northanger, "to describe a man's attitude towards encounters like this. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say my own towards this particular one. Because though, as far as the story is, she'd gone by, there had been that half-instant's pause—the moment as I said when she seemed to have pulled the muslin curtains and looked at me out of the window. That pause was indescribable. It was an encounter. Most often a woman like that says something—a fatuous word of endearment—a challenge—a salute as if you were old friends. This woman didn't say anything. She just looked through that pause at me, and though I could not have described her for the life of me, I felt clearly conscious of her personality.

"I don't know what a woman feels like about her own sex of that class. I expect most men would have felt what I did then, a sort of demand for consideration, quite unsupported by the conscience or moral standards of a county councillor. Christmas Day and that snow-storm

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when most people were sitting beside a warm fire awaiting the announcement of a comfortable meal ! I felt pretty sorry for her. I suppose it was this and that consciousness of her personality made me turn If she had said anything I should have walked straight on. She had gone by in silence, and I turned.

“ She had not only turned as well. She had stopped. With all that snow on the ground I hadn’t heard her. We stood there looking at each other and then she came back.

“ ‘ Going to your club ? ’ she said.

“ ‘ Coming from it,’ said I.

“ ‘ Going home, I suppose ? ’

“ I nodded my head.

“ ‘ And all the family expecting you back to dinner ? ’

“ I told her there was no family—merely dinner.

“ ‘ Alone ? ’ she asked.

“ ‘ Quite alone,’ said I.

“ That didn’t deter her. She started walking in my direction. I should have looked a fool if I had refused to accompany her. Besides that, there’s a considerable excitement of interest in talking to an absolute stranger of the other sex. Men and women too would indulge more

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frequently in that kind of adventure if they weren't so afraid of appearances. Probably the snow-storm gave me courage. We walked into St. James's Street together and up into Piccadilly.

"‘I live just in Stretton Street,’ said I. ‘If you come much farther, a mere common politeness will compel me to ask you in to dinner.’

“‘If you did,’ said she, ‘a mere common appetite for a comfortable meal would compel me to accept.’

“The human voice is an extraordinary thing. It is an unfailing indication of character and personality. You can’t really fake it. The best actor or actress in the world”—he made a sweep of his hand excluding Valerie Brett—“can only make up their face. They can’t make up their voice. They can imitate. But that’s not the same thing. There was something in this woman’s voice that guaranteed me against feeling ashamed of myself before my man, Charles. Charles is essentially a diplomat, but he has taste. How she was dressed didn’t matter so much. How she was dressed I couldn’t see, covered as she was with the snow that was falling. I don’t know anything about women’s dress, but I was conscious of the impression that she was what a man calls—all right.

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“ ‘ Allow me to invite you then,’ said I, and when she accepted I felt I had done a thing which you do, not so much because you want to, as because of some arrangement of things which needs a certain act from you at a certain given moment. I felt that Ganthonys refusal to come and dine with me was an essential part of that whole arrangement. I felt that my will was not concerned in the matter. I walked up the steps and opened the door with my latchkey, and it seemed as though it were a mere act of obedience on my part. When she passed me into the hall it was as though she had the control of the situation, not I.

“ I am trying to convey my impressions to you in the light of what happened, yet I don’t want to exaggerate those impressions because, up to the last moment, there was no reason why it should not have appeared absolutely natural. A little unconventional perhaps—but that’s all.

“ I have only four rooms at Stretton Street —a dining-room, a sitting-room and two bed-rooms. Charles showed her along to the spare bed-room to take her coat off and tidy up. It was ten minutes off dinner. And here is another impression I’m sure I don’t exaggerate. Charles’s manner from the moment he saw her was by

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no means that of the incomparable diplomat. It was not that he objected to her coming to a meal in the flat so much as that he would have avoided the situation if he could. When I taxed him with it afterwards, he said :

“ ‘ I make my apologies, sir, if I showed anything.’

“ ‘ You disapproved, Charles ? ’ I asked him.

“ ‘ No, sir—why should I disapprove ? ’

“ ‘ Then what was it ? ’

“ ‘ I just felt awkward, sir—I felt as though the lady knew more about things than what I did, which is an uncomfortable feeling, sir, when it’s a woman.’

“ Well—that’s that. Charles has no reason to exaggerate his impressions, because I’ve never told him anything. Anyhow, we don’t matter. She’s the centre of the tale. She came into the sitting-room in about five minutes with her coat and hat off. I suppose she was well-dressed. I can only tell you there was nothing of Jermyn Street about her appearance. At the same time, there she was, unmistakably, the courtesan. I don’t mean that she was rouged or dyed. I don’t mean that she made advances to me. I don’t mean that her conversation was anything but what any woman’s might have been who

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found herself dining with a man completely strange to her. She was perfectly natural, and yet there was this extraordinary suggestion about her that she was not just one of a type, but the type itself embodied in one person.

"Added to this was the impression I received directly she entered the room, that I had seen her before. Again and again through dinner, stealing glances, because I had a strong reluctance to show how interested I was, I tried to place her somewhere in my life. I failed so completely that for a time I gave it up. We just talked—oh, about all sorts of things. It came to jewelry. She was wearing a big cabochon ruby in a ring. It was the only bit of jewelry she had. I admired it and asked her where it came from.

"'I got that in Ceylon,' said she.

"Suddenly my memory quickened. I held my tongue till we got into the sitting-room. Then, while we were drinking coffee, I looked straight at her and said : 'Did you know a man named Ganthonys in Ceylon ?'

"If I had expected any flutter of surprise, I was disappointed. Very serenely she looked at me and she said :

"'Are you trying to place me ?'

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"I admit for the moment I was disconcerted. I didn't know whether to apologize—or frankly agree that I was.

"'My inquisitiveness is not as rude as it appears,' I said. 'I have a reason for asking.'

"She inquired quite placidly what it was.

"For answer I went straight across to my desk. Somewhere in one of the drawers was that snapshot Ganthonry had sent me from Ceylon. I fished it out, satisfied myself first, and then brought it across to her. So far as a snapshot can be said to be a likeness in its minute dimensions and unposed effect, that picture of Ganthonry's wife was the picture of the woman who was sitting there in my room. I'll swear to that.

"She took it from my hand. For quite a long while she sat there looking at it, a slow smile spreading over her face as I watched her. At the sound of the door-bell of my flat, she looked up, straight at me.

"'Does this man named Ganthonry come here?' she asked.

"Then it suddenly occurred to me. This was Ganthonry. It couldn't be anyone else—and somehow she knew it. I hurried out of the room before Charles could open the door.

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It was Ganthony. Despite his ifs and buts he'd come. And all this seemed part of the arrangement—part of some scheme of things which none of us could have prevented. I caught his arm as he passed through the door.

“‘Are you prepared for a shock?’ I said as quietly as I could.

“I don't know why he should have looked distressed so quickly, but he did.

“‘What is it?’ he asked.

“I pointed to my sitting-room door.

“‘Your wife's in there,’ said I.

“‘My wife's dead,’ he said, and there was a sharp note of anger in his voice. ‘I told you she was dead. I saw her dead’—and thrusting my arm away before I could stop him, he strode to the door, opened it and went in. For a moment I wondered whether I should follow. There's a sound principle about not interfering between a husband and wife. I was just about to go into the dining-room when the sense of an odd silence got me. There were no voices. I followed him. Ganthony was standing in the middle of the room staring at the little photograph of her. There was no one else there.

“Without a word to him I went to the little

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bedroom that opened off the sitting-room. Her hat and coat were gone. I came back and walked across to the window. My flat is on the ground floor. I opened the window. There were no signs of her having gone that way, though certainly the snow was falling so fast that if there had been, her footsteps outside would have been covered by then.

“I turned back and looked at Ganthonry.

“‘I’ll swear,’ I began.

“He just smiled at me, a thin sort of a smile, the smile of a man who has plumbed the depths of suffering and knows that nothing more can hurt him.

“‘Don’t bother,’ said he. ‘I’ve seen her myself. Nearly a year ago it was, at Monte Carlo. Last September I was in London. Just for three days. I saw her then. She’s dead,’ he added, ‘I saw her dead—as dead as that sort of woman ever dies.’”

Northanger passed his glass to Stenning to be replenished. All our minds were battling through the subsequent silence to ply him with our questions.

“It’s no good asking me any more about it,” said he—“that’s all I know and I don’t pretend to understand.”

THE GODS AND MRS. GRIMWOOD

MRS. GRIMWOOD was as respectable a woman as you could wish to find. She lived in Stanhope Gardens, S.W., which is respectable whichever way you look at it. Mr. Grimwood did things in the City which should have made any wife proud of her husband, only that so few women take the trouble to find out what those things are. Nevertheless, Mrs. Grimwood was proud of her Charles, partly because he was reliable, partly because he never complained to her about the trouble he had in making a comfortable income, and partly because he was always the same. Never very brilliant, never very witty, but always good-tempered, affable, and as considerate as an ill-nourished imagination would permit him to be.

If there was one complaint that Mrs. Grimwood would have made about her Charles, it was that he had no great share of good looks. His complexion was sallow. There was a strange bend in his nose. It was not bent enough to look interestingly broken, as though he had had

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a misspent youth, and it certainly was not Jewish. She had ascertained all about that before they were married. Having studied the appearance of an English gentleman, as discovered by one of our most popular novelists, and, knowing to a feature that it was "thus and thus"—as that novelist would say—she was determined that it was only an English gentleman she could marry.

But though Mr. Grimwood did not possess those characteristics described in that graphic manner, she had made no doubt he was English. She had given him six months to prove he was a gentleman, and then she had married him.

They had continued in that holy state for seven years, during all of which time Mrs. Grimwood upheld that model of respectability which, like a marigold, a virginia stock, or any of those flowers that readily seed themselves, blooms so freely in Stanhope Gardens.

Every morning at twelve o'clock she went to Barker's and did her shopping. Almost every afternoon from tea till the approach of dinner she played bridge in the houses of friends or in her own. The stakes were never more than threepence per hundred. In Stanhope Gardens it is in the nature of a vulgarity to play cards for

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more than one can afford. On summer evenings at eight o'clock, if you had passed the Grimwoods' house, probably seeking the shady side, you would have seen two respectable people seated at a tidy dinner table, with four shaded candles burning on the table, to show that it was dinner time despite the regulations of politicians who, if they can meddle with the clock, can meddle with anything. A passing glance would have convinced you that it was a properly constituted four-course dinner. A mere turn of the head and you would have said to yourself : "Soup, fish, joint, sweet." Had you happened to pass the following night and looked in again you would probably have muttered : "Hors d'œuvre, joint, sweet, savoury." It was this kind of impregnable respectability upon which Mrs. Grimwood had prided herself for all the seven years of her married life. She believed that nothing could assail it. With no consciousness of monotony, she saw herself thirty years hence saying :

"I thought we'd have hors d'œuvres this evening, Charles, instead of soup. Soup's not very good for one, and we had soup last night."

In all this must be recognized a certain lack of self-consciousness in Mrs. Grimwood. She was aware of her sex. With the aid of a cheap

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but efficient little dressmaker in the Gloucester Road, she appeared always to advantage, and was never at a loss for a costume to suit an occasion. But she was not aware of herself. The danger of being respectable is that it leaves no room for personality. So many people lately have discovered that. Repeating a former simile, it is like marigolds in a flower border. They must be kept strictly in check, or there is no room for anything else. Respectability can become a weed. It has to be thinned out. That pungent odour of burning vegetable matter from the back gardens of English family life sometimes quite smarted in Mrs. Grimwood's eyes. She was inclined to go about with her handkerchief to her nose, which always looks affected to the individual who believes in the necessity for burning his weeds.

There is no doubt that in the seven years of respectable married life Mrs. Grimwood had lost sight of her personality. She was no longer aware of that twinkle in her eye, awakened by the stimulus of adventure, which had beckoned Mr. Grimwood, and would give him no peace till adventure was swallowed up in realization. There was a certain dimple close to her mouth which appeared with a smile of real amusement.

The Gods and Mrs. Grimwood

Life in Stanhope Gardens was not often amusing, and to a great extent she had forgotten the dimple's existence. In countless little ways that had attracted Mr. Grimwood before they were married her personality had disappeared. She had become too respectable to notice it, until one day circumstance, life, the gods—if you like that better, for the gods are not dead, and still possess their sense of humour—took Mrs. Grimwood by the shoulders and shook her. They shook her considerably.

She was doing her morning shopping in Barker's. She was in the vegetable department, selecting the proper vegetable to go with cutlets leaning in their frills against a sort of ottoman of mashed potatoes. Having chosen haricots verts, which, judging by the time of year, must have come from abroad, bringing with them a sense of being French and out of season, she looked up to find an attendant, and saw a gentleman, obviously an English gentleman, who was standing, watching her, a few yards away. If ever a man could be described as "thus and thus," this man answered to that description. He had ordinary brown hair, and an ordinary brown moustache. His eyes were a steady grey. His skin was tanned, but that sort of tan which comes

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from an English sun which is unexpected rather than that of tan tropic heat which, being all you do expect of the tropics, is commonplace compared with English tan. He looked as though he had not long had a bath, which must be what is meant by "thus." And to Mrs. Grimwood he appeared to have walked by mistake off a grouse moor into Barker's vegetable department. This must be the other "thus."

Whatever it was, Mrs. Grimwood felt the blood tingling in her cheeks. She attributed it to the fact that she had been bending over the basket receptacle containing the French beans, and she sought her attendant.

She did not look in the gentleman's direction again. Respectability and the whole array of her seven years of married life forbade that. She went into the meat department to buy the cutlets. She was just paying her bill at the counter when she saw him again. He was standing near the carcasses of sheep they hang up so nicely and appetizingly on their bright steel hooks. This time their eyes fully met. It was not that he actually smiled, for an English gentleman never smiles as soon as this, but that she thought she saw his proposal for her to smile behind the steadiness of his grey eyes. She

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certainly did not accept that proposal, but she was conscious for the first time for some years of the existence of that dimple at the side of her mouth. With an effort she dispelled that depression in her cheek, took up her change, and walked away.

To her astonishment she found herself arguing what he was doing, first in the vegetable department, when he ought to have been on a grouse moor, and secondly, why he appeared in the meat—as they say—when his place was in the elements of life rather than the disjected members of it. Before he realized what she was doing, she had mounted the stairs and made her way to the ladies' underwear. An English gentleman might conceivably be discovered in the vegetables, or even in the meat. But no English gentleman she had ever known was to be seen in the department for ladies' underwear. For one thing they were far too shy. For another, they never knew what to do with their cigarettes, and altogether it was not done. If he followed her there, then, according to Mrs. Grimwood's calculations, it was for the astounding reason that he wanted to make her acquaintance. She was just fingering a garment hanging invitingly on a wax model, when he came in. So great was

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his desire to make her acquaintance that he strode into the room without the faintest air of timidity. She knew when her eyes met his again that there was that twinkle in them which had first beckoned to Mr. Grimwood eight years before. She could not resist it. The stimulus of adventure had called it forth.

Without restraint she let him see that twinkle, and then she hurried out of the underwear department with an assurance in her heart that no man could resist its beckoning, and certainly not one who had got up out of a hot bath and left a grouse moor to come into the vegetable department of Barker's stores to find her.

They met on the stairs, because on the stairs people may well be together, or they may be apart, and there is nothing very strange if, on the stairs, you hear a gentleman talking to a lady who is on another step altogether.

"Are you going to have some lunch here?" he asked.

And anyone passing up and down, unable to put their hand on Mrs. Grimwood's heart at that moment, would never have known these two had not been shopping together for the last hour.

They continued downstairs in single file

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and, without looking round, Mrs. Grimwood replied : " I'm sorry, but I'm going to lunch at home."

She was astonished at the quietness of her own voice. She was no less astonished at the ready and natural way in which she had accepted the unconventionality of the situation. Had Mr. Grimwood the evening before warned her between the sweet and the savoury to beware of speaking to strange men in public places, she would have thought he had taken leave of his senses. Having shown her concern for his reason, she might have asked him how it was possible for a stranger to talk to her in a public place if she had no desire to be talked to. She might have said with a fine air which would have sounded crushing and unanswerable in Stanhope Gardens :

" If people do that sort of thing, I presume it is six of the man and half a dozen of the woman. You ought to know me by now, Charles."

In Stanhope Gardens that would have sounded final. It had no meaning at all in High Street, Kensington. For though Charles may have known her, Mrs. Grimwood certainly knew nothing about herself. Most firmly she had believed she was respectable, yet here, by peregrinations, that had seemed to come about with the ease

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of long practice, she found herself seated in the comparative seclusion of the furniture department of Barker's, talking to a man she had never seen before. How he had got her there she could not exactly have said. It might have been a natural desire in her to avoid the crowds in other departments. But where was the deeper and more natural desire in her to preserve her respectability? She was a different woman. She felt she was a different woman. There was a certain Ursula Lumley who once upon a time had become a Mrs. Grimwood. For seven years it had been her belief they were one and the same person. Apparently they were not. There was still in some secret place, responsive to the invitation of an English gentleman, that same Ursula who had believed that life was a bit of an adventure. She was sitting there, then, in the furniture department of Barker's establishment, and a dimple was intermittently in the corner of her cheek, and a twinkle was persistently apparent in her eye.

" You're not wanting in audacity—are you ? " said she, as they sat down on a fifty-five guinea leather-covered settee. If one cannot afford settees at this price there is no harm in choosing the most expensive article to sit down upon in

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someone else's stores. It looks as if you were used to such luxuries.

"If I complimented you on your courage," he replied, "you might take it amiss. I admit it takes a fair amount of audacity to speak first, but I always admire the courage of a woman who replies."

"You have considerable experience, I've no doubt," said she.

He told her he expected that answer, "and if I were to say I had," he said, "you would be offended, and if I were to say I hadn't, you would set me down as a liar. Women take a delight," he added, "in putting impossible questions like that to a man, and delivering final judgment on him according to his reply."

She had the dimple at the corner of her mouth as she said : "I must come and learn something about my sex from you."

And he had the expression to be seen in an English gentleman's eyes as he steps out of his host's car on to the grouse moor, when he said :

"Do. Come to tea this afternoon, since you can't stop and have lunch here."

Mrs. Grimwood would have denied it so emphatically that you would have been convinced she was fascinated, if not by our English

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gentleman—for she was a married lady and lived in Stanhope Gardens—then certainly by the adventure which life was presenting to her. Instead of saying, “I’m afraid I can’t,” which is what you might have expected of her, and she undoubtedly would have expected of herself, she replied :

“ Much as I like John Barker’s, I don’t travel long distances to have my meals with him.”

“ I would not have suggested John Barker myself,” said he. “ As a matter of fact, I live in Queen’s Gate.”

This used to be an address for English gentlemen with large families, convenient to Kensington Gardens. With the advance of science, and the popularity of modern dance clubs, English gentlemen no longer expect large families at the hands of their wives, and Queen’s Gate, as an address, has considerably depreciated. But it still has a lingering sound to the ears of those who live in Stanhope Gardens. There can be no doubt that Mrs. Grimwood was impressed.

She said : “ You don’t expect me to come and have tea there, do you ? ”

As a question it conveyed all that respectability and unapproachableness which it is dearly in the heart of every woman to suggest, whatever

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her state, upon first encounters. As a statement it did not preclude the possibility of her going to tea with him somewhere.

"I had thought," said he, "that if you would do me the honour of having tea with me at all, that would be as convenient a place as any. Seeing that you hobnob with John Barker, I take it you live in the neighbourhood. It would not be far out of your way."

He went on to inform her it was only a flat he lived in, in Queen's Gate.

He made it all so engagingly simple that Mrs. Grimwood replied : "I'm afraid it's quite out of the question," and added : "What time do you have tea ?"

He told her that the hour of that feast moved in accordance with the arrival of those who came to share it with him.

"No doubt a good many," said she.

He looked at her steadily with his grey eyes.

"If I were to assume," he said, "that because you have sportingly participated in this little adventure, it was your custom to answer any remark a stranger might make to you, would you be offended ?"

"Most certainly I should."

"I am on my best behaviour," said he,

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"and would not dream of giving offence to you."

He was rewarded with a dimple.

"You're exceedingly adroit," said she.

"This game cannot be played without that quality."

"But why did you want to play it with me?"

"Because, as I watched you selecting those French beans in the vegetable department I not only said to myself, 'This is a pretty woman,' but after a few moments added : 'This is a pretty woman who is giving up her prettiness to the selection of a vegetable for to-night's dinner when, if for a moment she lent it to me, it would appear to far greater advantage, and might relieve that look of worried concentration which the choice of food always brings into the human face.'"

Mrs. Grimwood heard in the sound of her laughter a frank and genuine amusement she had not heard for some years.

"Thank you very much for your invitation," she said. "I can't suppose you are hoping I shall accept it."

"I never begin to play a game," said he, "without a reasonable hope of winning."

She suggested he should write this down as one of his very occasional losses.

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"It would be such a pity to be alive," he said, "if one didn't take a risk sometimes. I mustn't keep you. Besides, I've got to order some *pâtisserie*. I'm just going."

* * * * *

Mrs. Grimwood had lunch as usual by herself in the dining-room in Stanhope Gardens. This morning she had no book on the table beside her. Across the road the trees in the garden looked the same as usual. Everything was just the same as it had always been for seven years. The only thing that had altered was the fact that it was not Mrs. Grimwood who was sitting there, but Ursula Lumley, who, whatever she put into her mouth, imagined she was eating *pâtisserie*, and that anywhere but in Stanhope Gardens.

It was all very well his talking about buying that *pâtisserie*, but that was only his—well—the rather attractive self-confidence there was in everything he said.

He could not for a moment suppose that a married woman with any respect for her reputation would come to tea to the flat of an entirely unknown man who had made her acquaintance in that casual fashion. He might even go to the expense of buying his *pâtisserie*. He knew quite well he would be eating them by himself.

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How extremely disconcerted he would be if she did go. She would stay there five minutes, laughing at him. What a fool she could make him look. He had behaved very bravely in Barker's. But could even an English gentleman carry off that uncomfortable situation of being hoisted with his own petard ?

There would be nothing disreputable about it. So far from losing in respect, as she admitted she quite possibly may have done in Barker's, she would not only regain, but increase its proportions. However much he might dislike her, a man always had considerable respect for a woman who made him look a fool. She began to feel it was due to herself to go. By the time lunch was over the inner voice of Mrs. Grimwood demanding proof of her respectability was even dominating the whisper of Ursula Lumley pleading for adventure.

* * * * *

It takes a good deal of courage for a respectable woman to knock on the door of the dwelling of a strange gentleman, however English and pledged to chivalry he may be. Walking up Stanhope Gardens it had seemed to Mrs. Grimwood she was out upon an enterprise to re-establish her respectability. In the Cromwell Road

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Ursula Lumley was again at her side, needing a little to urge her now to the adventure. By the time she stood before the door of flat number three in that house in Queen's Gate, she felt like a woman in a large hotel who, having forgotten her dressing-gown and borrowed her husband's overcoat, has had to walk the length of a long corridor to the bathroom, and is not quite certain whether it is not already occupied.

The sound of the knocker had scarcely made its thunder in her heart before the door opened, and, true to his word, as gentlemen are, he was there to admit her.

She hurried into the little hall.

They had a lot of mice in Stanhope Gardens. They set traps for them in all the rooms. Late one night in the darkness, when Charles was breathing heavily from his bed, she had heard the door of a mousetrap snap. The closing of the door behind her in Queen's Gate sounded like that.

This little hall borrowed a dim light from two of the rooms that opened off it. She felt relieved when he opened the door of a spacious living-room, full of light, and invited her to enter.

She went in, with the same kind of astonishment one has in reading the private affairs of

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complete strangers who allow them to be picked over by newspaper reporters in the law courts. This was a glimpse, more than a glimpse, a survey of the private life of an English gentleman.

It was not in the least what she expected.

There were no sporting prints. There were no photographs of shooting parties, football teams, or cricket elevens. There was no air of a man returning with a gun case or a golf-bag, taking off his boots, flinging himself into a well-worn leather armchair, and drinking a long whisky and soda.

There was no smell of tobacco. If there were any odour at all, it was that of incense, but so faint that, even though she was Church of England, she could not certainly detect it.

On the mantelpiece there stood a fifteenth-century crucifix. She did not know it was fifteenth-century. She lived quite close to the South Kensington Museum, but as has been said, she went to Barker's.

Instead of photographs and sporting prints there were pictures on the walls, not such as are to be seen in the Academy, which you can understand, but which you read of being exhibited in queer little galleries that seem to exist for nothing but art.

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Instead of tobacco jars and decanters and all those evidences of an Englishman's private life, there were *objets d'art* which at a glance she knew must be valuable if for no other reason than that one or two had pieces chipped off them.

And there, in the centre of the room, on a small but exquisitely carved refectory table, was a tray containing a dainty Rockingham tea service. He told her later it was Rockingham. And on the tray was a dish loaded with *pâtisserie*.

" You've expected me ! " she said, for astonishment in a woman has much the same effect as strong drink in a man. It inclines them to the truth.

" I always expect a lady," said he, " to act up to her curiosity. Eve did. I should have been distinctly disillusioned in your sex if you hadn't come."

It was here the gods took Mrs. Grimwood by the shoulders and shook her. They shook her considerably. Was she respectable ? Was any woman she knew in Stanhope Gardens who played bridge for threepence a hundred—were any of them really respectable ?

She turned away to cover her confusion. Her eyes fell upon a picture, a small, full-length portrait in a broad black frame on the wall. It

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was decidedly impressionist. By some instinct, traceable to unremembered experience, she recognized it as the work of a foreign artist. It was not English. She felt it could not be English. She looked closer.

It was a portrait of him, of her host. He was dressed in the costume of a Russian peasant.

“Is this you?” she muttered.

“Very few have mistaken it,” said he.

“Was it fancy dress?”

“No—that picture was painted of me by Gabrolieff in Moscow.”

“You are not English?”

“Oh, no.”

“Then you’ve not just come down from Scotland?”

“But why?”

The only sign of astonishment was in his eyebrows.

“Only—that I thought.” She could not say what she thought. The nearest approach to telling him what she thought lay in asking him what he was doing in Barker’s.

“I am studying the ways of the tradesmen in your country,” said he, “and how can I do that without knowing something of the ways of their customers?”

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She looked swiftly about her. What was this respectability? Was it a myth? The plate on the table seemed vulgarly laden with *pâtisserie*. But there it was, and it was filled for her.

* * * * *

The tea-party that followed the shaking of Mrs. Grimwood by the shoulders is not to the point. More to the point was the fact that that evening she met her Charles in the hall in evening dress when he returned from the City.

“ Go up and dress,” said she.

He looked amazed.

“ You’ve got to take me out.”

“ Where ? ”

“ Oddenino’s—the Café Royal—anywhere
This place is stuffy! ”

WEATHER WISDOM

I WENT to the meteorologist's shop to fetch my old walnut-wood barometer. In the process of moving house the column of mercury had been disturbed. It had needed resetting. A letter from the shop informed me it was ready to take away.

I have an affection for that barometer describable only as sentiment but meaning a little more than sentiment to me. It is, in my mind, what would have been called sentiment, before that word had fallen into the hands of the materialists and been shaped into another and less dignified interpretation.

The materialists came into fashion when Darwin shook the world with his hammer blows of evolutionary science. They are still holding their own. To them, sentiment is unreal—inexcusable—bad taste—a symptom of innate vulgarity.

I refuse to admit that my affection for my Queen Anne barometer is vulgar or inexcusable. The materialist feels just the same for his most treasured possessions, the only difference between

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us being that he will not admit, or speak of, or explain it. He is ashamed of it. I am not.

"Fair if rise—foul if fall" is engraved on the brass face of it. I like it for that. There is something direct about it. Let me be quite honest and admit there is an absence of sentimental nonsense about it which appeals to me. It is like the bluntness of an honest man telling me just what I may expect and leaving me to discover all the subtle shades of difference between a south-west gale and an anticyclone.

These, anyhow, are the feelings I have about it when every morning I look to see how much the column has risen or fallen, whether the surface of it is concave or convex, and, with the appearance of the sky and the direction of the wind; begin to make my wise prognostications of the weather for the day.

Weather wisdom is a faculty of which a man is inordinately proud. I have seldom met a woman who boasted about it or even possessed it. By some tacit agreement in the house it is left to the man to say what the weather is going to do. It is his prerogative and one of which he is excessively proud. He feels ashamed when he is wrong. He talks about it loudly when he is right. If he says it is going to rain on the day

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of the garden party—and he says it regretfully, but nevertheless as one who must speak the truth that is in him—it is almost painful to him when it turns out to be fine, and the women can wear their daintiest gowns after all.

I believe I am as shrewd as any man in my weather wisdom. There is a look in the sky that is hidden from everyone in the house but me—there is a note in the wind, a feeling in it too as I lift up my face into the direction from which it is blowing which I alone can hear and sense. The swallows are flying high or low. I alone have noticed that. No one but I saw the colour in the sky last evening at sunset. No one but I observed that cluster of gnats spinning in the air as the sun went down. I, alone in the house, can associate in their true proportions these various signs and read from their portents what weather the day will bring forth, for I alone see that barometer in my room and know what the mercury is doing.

And when I am at fault, only I know the chagrin and disappointment of my false report.

For all these reasons, pleasurable and even painful, I have an affection for my barometer, and it was with no little delight at the receipt

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of my letter from the meteorologist that I went to bring it away.

The man over the counter in that extremely scientific-looking shop, filled with its various instruments, complimented me upon my barometer and won my heart at once.

"Don't see many like that now," said he.

I took it carefully out of his hands and looked at the old brass face of it with its roughly engraved figures, as though it were the face of an old friend met with after a long absence.

"It's quite accurate, I suppose?" I hazarded, though had he said it was not, I should not have believed him. It was a pleasure, nevertheless, to hear him reply:

"Accurate as anything made to-day. Mercury can't lie."

I felt he had said that before, and not once but many times, to nearly every customer with whom he discussed the accuracy of barometers. "I've set it for a hundred feet," he concluded. "Of course you know how to adjust the reading for whatever height you are above sea-level."

I knew of course. A man does not boast about his weather-wisdom and not know how to regulate the reading of a barometer for altitude. It is calculations like these which lift him above the intelli-

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gence of his womenfolk and secure for him alone that position of weather prophet to the household.

I was just about to take my possession away when he called my attention to a little instrument neatly made in brass which he brought out of a glass case below the counter.

"Wouldn't you like to have one of these?" said he. "If you live in the country you'd find it very useful, and the readings are guaranteed right eighty-five times out of a hundred."

It was a round instrument, with a face like a clock, but made up of various discs covered with many figures, the outer disc having readings of the weather. I asked what it was. He took it out of my hands and showed me. By turning one disc with readings of the thermometer opposite the readings of the barometer on another disc, still farther to correspond with a third disc on which were sectioned off the various directions of the wind, they all came automatically in line with a reading of the weather forecast for the day. He showed me how it was done.

"We guarantee the readings are right eighty-five times out of a hundred, and my opinion is it's ninety-five per cent. right. They are worked out on an exhaustive average of the meteorological reports over the last fifty years."

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He handed it over to me again, but I did not take it from him.

"What's to become of me?" I asked.

"How do you mean, what's to become of you?"

"Well—is that to give the weather forecast every day?"

"Yes—more accurate than any person—must be."

"You're trying to rob me," said I, "of the first pleasure of my day. You want to make life accurate and exact. You're taking all the surprise, all the joyous uncertainty out of it. You're robbing the weather of its mystery—and you're making me the voice of a mere machine—right ninety-five times out of a hundred. You're making life horrible. You're robbing me of the biggest claim I have to my assumption of the divine. Do you know what you are?" I exclaimed.

He shook his head in some amazement.

"You're a materialist," I said. "Now I know what a materialist really is. He's a man who takes away all hope we have of being a little better than we really are, and calculates our virtues by machinery. That's what you are. You're a materialist."

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He looked at me as though he were looking at a barometer on the top of a mountain, and adjusting the reading to sea-level.

I took my barometer away. That very evening, I put it in its new place hard by a window that looks down to the south-east over the Romney Marshes. What with my view and my column of mercury I felt I was as well equipped to read the weather as any meteorologist with his mechanical devices.

Scarcely a week later, walking down to the marshes, I met a shepherd changing pastures. Five score of sheep and more were moving in a fleecy mass before him.

"Going to be a fine day to-morrow," said I.

"How d'ye know that?" he replied.

"Wind's veered to the west," I said. "House martins are flying high and the barometer's gone up three points."

"Bamometer!" said he.

I allowed him his pronunciation, but I did not like his scorn.

"Mercury can't lie," said I sententiously, and so easily that it felt as though it would not be long before that remark would be my own.

He stood a moment and looked at me while his sheep cropped in the hedge.

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"I don't believe in those machines," said he. "Everything's done by machinery these days. Once they found they could make a wheel with cogs in it, they thought they could turn the world round and upside down. See that?"

He pointed down to the south. Just above the horizon, where lay Rye and the sea, there was a low belt of cloud in a purple sky. I nodded my head.

"Up in our kitchen," he added, "we've got a bunch of hops. Been picked these five years. They're hanging like as if they was made of flannel."

Then he thrust a dirty finger in his mouth and held it up into the breeze. In a moment he took it down and examined it.

"It'll be wet to-morrow," said he as though there were not another word in the whole vocabulary to be said about it. Then he looked at me again, and sharply this time.

"You've got all the education," he said. "What's the word for those as relies on these mechanical things like barometers and such?"

I felt as though I were standing before my Maker at the sound of the last trump.

"Materialists!" I replied.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "That's what you are. You're a materialist."

THE DEVIL'S IN THE HEMP

I

WHEN on board ship he had talked to her about his fortune, he had meant what was a fortune to him. They had not gone into figures. Travelling acquaintanceships are essentially ephemeral. As much as any others they are essentially for the passing of time. The only point of difference is that there is more time to pass. They are liable to become more intimate than the passing acquaintanceships on shore. Long days on deck, long evenings after dinner, encompassed and thrown together by the walls of that world of water about them, create a spurious intimacy which, once the gangways are lowered, escapes to find its normal value.

When she came on board at Port Said she had been pointed out to him as the Honourable Evelyn Ankerson, daughter of Lord Ankerson.

"England," he said to himself. "The breed I'm coming back to."

For the first day he watched her, as one who has dealt with animals watches a pedigree beast

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for every movement of the head, for every action of the limbs.

When that first evening she came into the saloon for dinner, dressed in such fashion as he had never seen in Australia, and eclipsing every woman there, not ostentatiously, but as much by the way she wore her frock as the frock itself, he said to himself:

“ Pure bred,” and thought of the stock he had come from and added to himself; “ and now back to it to breed ‘em again.”

He had been pointed out to her by the Captain as John Spurrier, a Colonial, coming back with his money to buy a place in the old country.

They had met the second day out from Port Said. She had been spending the winter in Cairo. They learnt the superficial facts about each other. Watching them walking up and down the deck, people said it was a case from the beginning. There is a romantic sense of eugenics in most people. They mated the muscularity of his six feet with her slim modern figure. Elderly ladies called them a couple. The young women found all the faults they could with her, but admitted admiration when they said: “ Who couldn’t look attractive in a dress like that! ” Apparently they knew the price of it

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to an odd pound. Spurrier had not talked to any of the young women since they left Port Adelaide. They put it all down to the Paris model she wore with apparent but not pretentious inspiration.

For the rest of the voyage they were inseparable. In that same superficial way, characteristic of these shipboard intimacies, she learnt the history of the Spurriers since before the Restoration, the loyalist cause they died for, the home and estates they had, their subsequent departure from the old country. Littlecote Manor had been sold. For a hundred and fifty years it had been in the hands of farmers. Finally it had been turned into three or four dwelling-places.

"I can see it," she had said: "labourer's cottages. Hundreds of manor houses have gone that way."

Then out in Australia he had heard of the estate coming into the market. She had asked how many acres and when so casually he had said, "Some hundreds," she had easily magnified it to a thousand or so and had judged his fortune upon that scale.

"Our motto," he had told her, "is one of the few in English. We seemed to find our own tongue good enough."

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Her smile had approved of that and questioned what it was. He said it with the pride of an Australian coming home.

"Strike — Spurrier — the devil's in the hemp."

He showed her an old seal with the mailed arm uplifted gripping its sword. There was some story of a Spurrier leading his men into a corn-field where the enemy lay in ambush, hidden in the up-grown stalks. He made her see the blood and the trampled corn.

"That's what I said to myself," he told her, "when I saw that notice of the estate being sold. I struck with a pen at a piece of paper. My solicitors out there communicated home and I bought it."

He gave her the impression that he was coming home with his fortune to reinstate the place, to make the Spurriers live in England as they had lived. His energy and purpose appeared impelling to her out there under a cloudless sky, with the faint lapping of the water about them. The impression was right enough, but it was superficial. He had all the energy and purpose. He was going to make the Spurriers live in England again. But it was more in his blood than in his pocket.

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After buying the estate he had only a few thousands left. Never the fortune she had instinctively calculated to uphold her habits of life. She had seen Littlecote Manor and its lands out of his eyes as he looked at it through generations of Spurriers. It became a country-seat with the money he would spend on it. Without calculation centred wholly upon herself, she saw the mistress of Littlecote spending the summer months there, after a winter abroad and spring in London.

When they said good-bye at Gravesend, and the gangways swung down letting life escape into its normal channels, she had made a promise to come out to see him at Littlecote. She stayed often with friends near by. It would be easy to run over. Fifteen miles—she drove her own little car. He must meet her father.

They had gripped hands. He had felt the touch of her long, delicate fingers about his own. Up to that moment, often though they had been together, he had felt her to be unapproachable. There was no reason that an Ankerson should seem so to a Spurrier. The distance was in himself. Four generations had been in Australia. The life had roughened them. He had felt those four generations of

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breeding like a gulf between them. It was he who had not dared to approach her.

Many times as they walked on deck and with a side-glance he had noted the poise of her head, the line of her neck, the expression of coolness about her lips, the fine cut of her ankles, he had said to himself: "We shall come back to that in a generation or two." But he had not dared to approach it then.

But as she gave him her hand in good-bye, she gave him somewhat else. He could not define what it was. It may have been in the lingering touch of her fingers. It may have been in the parting of her lips as she smiled. There was no hint of it in her eyes. They were intensely calm. He wondered if emotion could ever dilate or stir them. Yet there was something of promise he felt in their parting. She seemed to be conveying to him it was not the end, but the beginning.

"By God, yes—the beginning," he muttered as he followed her with his eyes down the gangway.

II

Four families of farm labourers had not spoilt Littlecote for him. The Tudor brick,

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the octagonal chimneys, the Elizabethan gables had weathered so completely into the environment of oaks and beeches and the orchards about them that he felt the generations of Spurriers around him and knew he was amongst his own. Coming to the gate which opened upon a rough road across a field that doubtless once was a drive through park land avenueed with trees, he stood a long while looking at the house before he entered. There was no capacity in him to regard his own sensations. He just leant on the gate-rail and in those moments, for the first time, left Australia at the outer edge of the world and became an Englishman in England. Four generations of farmers fell from him. He stood there, shedding an old skin and disclosing a new one that shone and was glaring to his unaccustomed senses, but which he felt to be his real self as relative to life as those deep-toned bricks and the fretted mortar were to the oldest oak tree rearing its head above the chimneys. In Australia he had felt himself to be an individual entity dependent upon his own exertions, his own activities. Here, as he leant on the gate and looked down the rough road through the field at that pile of masonry half hidden amongst the trees, he was a Spurrier. It would not all be

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what he did that mattered. It was what had been done before him, what would be done after.

These were not emotions so much as spiritual readjustments. Circumstance had severed the Spurrier artery. For four generations the blood had flowed through unaccustomed and immaterial veins to keep life in the spiritual body. Then as he stood there, the old channel had been re-established. He was conscious of something in his energy relating to something other than himself. He pushed open the gate and another man entered upon the ground of Littlecote. He closed it and that which had seemed to be himself was left on the high-road that any man may walk upon. Every step across the field led him nearer to the new man, farther from the old. If he realized a strangeness of sensation at all, it was that the new man was centuries older than the old. Here he was part of life that had been and was to be. There in Australia he had been something in the mere existence of things struggling towards life that would come some day, but not in his time.

He kicked on the door that had once been the main entrance, and now was one door giving access to the four dwellings into which the house was divided. A labourer's wife opened it.

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"I'm Mr. Spurrier," he said. "I've bought this property. Expect you've heard. I want to look around."

He felt the superficiality of his intrusion. Still deeper he felt the inevitability of his right. She grudged him admission. He took it without question.

Children were sprawling on the stone-paved floor. Cheap furniture filled the corners of the room. An open fireplace, half-hidden behind drapings of coloured cloth with tasselled fringes, held a kitchen stove. The broad spaces at either side were filled with the odd possessions that accumulate in a house abounding with children.

He had no conception of architectural formation. It did not seem to him as he stood looking at the covered beams in the ceiling that disappeared through the walls with no completion of design, that this was no room any human architect could possibly have conceived. He saw the ill-considered shape of it as confined in the space surrounded by its four walls and took it to be one of the original rooms in the house. Wandering from one apartment to another he realized none of its possibilities of architectural beauty. A wall of Elizabethan panelling nailed to deal battens to make a partition, smeared with

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whitewash, was a real wall to him. He was satisfied that this warren of a dwelling-place, housing four families with countless offspring, was the home he had returned to.

He went outside and could not visualize the gardens within those buttressed red brick walls that now enclosed rank-growing grass and beds of nettles. His sensations were deeper than the mere material possibility of beauty. There was no fretting sense of disgust at the vandalism of treatment from which the place had suffered. It was his home. Everything that might happen to be wrong, he would put it right. He had the feeling of security of five thousand pounds lodged in a bank in London to do all that needed to be done. This was the fortune he had talked about on board ship. He had paid the purchase money. This that remained over was his to spend on the house and on the farm. He knew nothing of expert decorators, of furnishing establishments and architects who could have melted down the five thousand pounds to the last sovereign and still have asked for more to satisfy their artistic appetites.

The land was more to his understanding. The solicitors had been instructed to buy the stock and everything essential to continued pro-

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gress of the farm. He had come there that day, two days after his arrival in England, to see for himself and by himself what was his.

By the evening he had been round every field of the four hundred and thirty acres. He saw his living there. He was not asking for a fortune. He knew pretty well the values of these British cattle and this English fruit. There was much to be done that had been left undone, new methods to be introduced that would waken up these old men who worked on the land. He was well-satisfied with all he had seen. He went back to London the same night, and all the way in the train, his mind was constructing associations between the Honourable Evelyn Ankerson and what he had seen that day.

Without any difficulty he pictured her in that warren of rooms. They would be furbished up a bit, of course. She could have what furniture she liked. But there he could see her, Paris model and all, and realized no incongruous anomaly.

In a month's time cottages had been found for the labourers' families and he was installed. He occupied the living-room he had first seen and a bedroom above.

"I've cleared out those rabbit breeders," he

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wrote to his solicitor. "Now you'd better come down and see the place."

Robert Horridge, of "Horridge, Malet and Stinson," came down by a morning train. Notwithstanding that he wore a bowler hat, an over-coat with a velvet collar and carried an umbrella. Spurrier intended him to see the land. Horridge had long but not sharply pointed moustachios. His eyes were like a bird's. He had arresting gestures demanding attention, a grip of the arm, an open hand held out like a policeman staying the traffic, a lifted forefinger engaging caution. At the end of the afternoon when he had been to the farthest boundary, the points of his moustachios had fallen. His eyes were placid. He sat in the living-room without a gesture, listening almost apathetically to the enormous energy of Spurrier, enlarging upon his projects for the land. With fruit and hops to be planted, and all the advantages of a mixed farm, it was to bring him in a clear thousand or so a year. Rot, this talk about farming not paying. It paid farmers. It didn't pay fools who played at it.

Horridge shifted uncomfortably in his seat to rest his legs, and said he would have to do something to the house.

"That'll be done," said Spurrier.

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" You'd better get advice from an architect."

" That'll be done presently," said Spurrier.

" You can't go on living in it like this," said Horridge. He lived in Onslow Gardens and knew nothing of old houses, but it seemed to him that something more presentable ought to be made of all this space.

" I'm waiting for someone to see it first," said Spurrier : " then I'll tackle the whole show."

Horridge's eyes became birdlike for a moment. He looked out from under the hedge of his eyebrows.

" Someone ? "

" Yes—a woman."

Horridge smiled. He nearly winked. He became alive. This was something more in his line than arable fields and fruit plantations.

III

She came with her father one morning when Spurrier was at the other end of four hundred and thirty acres. The surprise of their visit was not altogether unintentional.

" Let's have a look at him," Ankerson said, " When he's not gingered up."

This superficial eye to business since straitened circumstances had compelled him to

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trade with his name in city directorships disgusted her. She was constrained to admit he was right, but did not give him the benefit of her concurrence.

“It’s sneaking,” she said.

“Then tell me what’s the object,” said he, “in going to see him at all?”

She would not confess to that. She was quite aware that her parent knew. There were many drawbacks about parents. But this was not putting it into words, making a registered thought of it like a will at Somerset House that anyone could read. He was right. It was business. It was common-sense. She withdrew opposition and drove him over in her two-seater from the house where they were staying. Having some sense of what might eventuate, he grudged even that. It was eighteen miles. Fully apprehensive, he wangled it that one of the house cars should fetch him back to lunch. He knew Evelyn and her fancies for impossible young men. There had been Vincent Treagus. What girl in her senses could think of marrying a poet, a youngest son, too, of as poor a title as his own. Prospects! Career! Just because he had been brilliant up at Oxford. A dramatic poet who might make his fortune writing for the stage! She put up

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all the arguments she knew, but she had the essential common-sense to realize it is not the poets nowadays who make livings. As a last resort she had thrown Flecker's "Hassan" at him, and he had thrown it back with the comment :

"Dead poets aren't prolific enough to buy you all you want."

She had had the grace and the sense of humour to laugh at the comic justice of that.

Arriving at Littlecote, Lord Ankerson found it even more ludicrous than he had imagined. Waiting in the living-room while Mrs. Malt, the housekeeper, went in search of Spurrier, he looked all about him and then at his daughter.

She was forced to laugh at last, but more at the ludicrous expression on his face.

"You've got to make allowances," she said. "You can see what a lovely old place it'll be when he's spent some of his fortune on it."

"Four thousand might touch it up a bit," said he.

She tried to induce his mind to speculate on what could be made farming out in Australia. Judging things by face value he was not impressed. A man who could live five minutes in that house as it was was not in easy reach of money. She reserved her opinion on that.

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" Still want to stay to lunch ? " he inquired.

" If he asks us," said she.

In that event, he told her, she must look after herself. He did not see himself eating lunch in that room with a well-appointed table and good port not more than eighteen miles away.

A quarter of an hour's conversation with Spurrier convinced him there were strict limitations to that Australian fortune. Spurrier was shrewd about life, but he had little shrewdness where the world was concerned. Evelyn saw the baited trap behind every remark of her father's. There were even moments when, despite herself, she admired his guile. With a frank ingenuousness, Spurrier walked into them all. Half she admired, half pitied him. He was induced to confidence upon what he was going to spend on the place. He talked about a thousand pounds as though it were more than most men would spend on a roof and walls already standing. They raised their houses from the bare ground for less in Australia.

The car came and Ankerson left his daughter to what he had warned her might be a basin of beef-steak and kidney pudding. It was less than that. Mrs. Malt had made a shepherd's pie out of a cold joint of mutton. Spurrier ate it

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with relish and was hard to convince that she did not want a second helping.

After lunch he took her round the house. He was expecting an architect in a few days.

"D'you know what an architect'll tell you ?" she asked.

He shook his head in a sublime ignorance.

"He'll tell you that four thousand pounds might just make it presentable."

"Don't you think it's more or less presentable as it is ?"

She was glad her father had not heard him say that. She wished he had never said it at all.

As far as he could make out, she knew as much as an architect.

"Practically the whole interior will have to be gutted," she said. "Anyone could see at a glance from the outside you've got a bit of real history. But the devils have been at it inside."

"In the hemp," said he.

"That's it," she replied ; "in the hemp. It's been hiding there these last fifty years. We're just standing here in this country, waiting for it to spring out."

She called the devil labour, socialism—and left it at that without talking of the Russian bogey. He listened as though she were a social economist

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talking wisdom. She had all the phrases that lie about after a good dinner in the high places. She had her intelligence too, and a quick wit where others gave her the substance of the thought behind it. Sometimes it was the mere glitter of words. Looking at the fine shape of her face, the calm eyes, the cool lips, they dazzled him.

“ If you follow those carved beams through this wall ”—she took him into the next room and showed them to him in the ceiling there—“ you'll be convinced that this was once all one huge room. The hall most likely. Probably a staircase came into it—a beautiful, carved Elizbethan staircase. Are there any traces of it ? ”

He shook his head.

“ To buy a staircase fit for a hall that size—you can—they are to be had—would cost you seven or eight hundred pounds. A hall, like this, would be lost—wasted—without it. There was probably a musician's gallery. That room where we had lunch, have you examined the walls of it ? ”

He shook his head again.

“ There's probably panelling behind the plaster. I see lots of old houses. I love them. We had a wonderful place in Warwickshire once. The devil has it to grow his hemp. I always ask

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what things cost. I like to know how they've been restored. That fireplace is Tudor. If you ripped the grate out, you'd find the open fireplace, perhaps with its fire-back and everything just as it was. They seldom troubled to pull down when they put up these abominations. They just plastered over."

She was knowledgeable enough to amaze him. He let her do all the talking. Following her from room to room, he listened to the drip, drip of his thousands as they drained away.

When they came back again to the living-room, he suddenly held her arm. She was surprised, but not to resenting.

"I shall do it all," he said quietly, "every bit of it. I'm going to bring the Spurriers back here to Littlecote; it's due to 'em to make it theirs again. There's a good living to be made on the farm with a bit of capital at the back of you. That's what farmers want in this country—a bit of capital. They think you can strip the earth and then make a living out of it. It's a business like everything else. It wants money putting into it as well as taken out. The only men who have capital are the gentleman farmers who do it for a game, mostly to breed pheasants and make a playground for foxes. They're fools. They put

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the money in, but they put it in the wrong end. They put it in, then shoot at it. Farming's not fun, any more than making steel. They know that abroad. Countries like France and Germany can feed themselves. Over here you use your land as though one could live on pheasants and partridges. I'll make this land grow a living. I shall have enough left over when the house is done. It's due to them to do it. It's due to you."

She slipped her arm from his hand. A step made a distance between them across which she could look at him.

"To me? I don't understand."

With more knowledge of the world, he would have discovered all the meaning behind her smile. It was plainer than words, plainer than the distance of that one step away from him. It closed the door at which he sought entrance as gently and yet completely as though she had gone from the room and left him there alone. All he considered, and in an amazement, was whether after all she was not quick of understanding. Yet that look as she had left the boat at Gravesend, the faint pressure of her fingers on his hand. He could not believe the misunderstanding was his.

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"Yes—to you," he repeated. "All that you want it. I'll spend every penny I have to make it fit for you. Four thousand pounds if it needs it. I've got it and a thousand more. You knew this on the boat. Didn't you? We came straight for each other after the first day. There was no mistaking that."

She was listening so intently to the virility in his voice that still he mistook it all for acquiescence. It was the first time in her life she had ever heard a man talk like this. It was new, like one of those new plays at a Sunday theatre in London—arresting, provocative, but no commercial possibility in it. Yet she could not do anything else but listen.

"You know I love you without my telling you," he went on. "You don't want speeches and gestures." Suddenly he took both her arms in his hands and held her there. His power, the sense of vital contact in his touch absorbed her. She felt herself upon the edge of volcanic nature and thrilled to the thought that she knew she would keep her head. It reminded her of a day when with a party she had climbed Vesuvius and then returned to the hotel in Naples that evening and danced to jazz music. Vesuvius had awed her. It was wonderful. She had

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played with the sensation of flinging herself down into the crater.

"Wonderful it would be," she had said to one of them, "to just let oneself be burnt up with life."

They had not approved of her taste for the wonderful. She had not approved of it herself. She knew as she let the sensation play with her that she would be dancing that night at the hotel.

So now with Spurrier, she let him hold her arms and draw her eyes with his eyes, and stirred to the sound of his voice making deep vibrations all through her. But her eyes were not dilated. Her lips were still cool. Yet she could not bring herself to destroy the sensation without taste of it. It would have been like refusing to climb Vesuvius lest it should make her tired for the dancing in the evening. If fatigue were to be the end of it, these glimpses of volcanic nature were too rare to be refused. She could not summon herself to put him absolutely away. He attracted her more than in that moment she thought wise to admit even to herself.

"You don't give a body time to think," she said. "I know that was the approved-of method in feudal days. Socialism's put it out of fashion. Do the house. Let me see it again when it's done."

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"Aren't we to meet any more till then?" he asked.

"Why not? But not like this. You're dangerous."

She flattered him to please herself, and went to start her car.

When she had gone he returned to the living-room, and in a violent urge to be doing something began tearing the paper and the plaster off the wall. It was panelling—oak—Elizabethan—half-ruined with years of plaster, but it came up a deep brown to the edge of his pocket-knife.

IV

They met once and again in places where conversation to him was like wire-walking, a prolonged feat of acrobatics for which he found himself intellectually muscle-bound while they glided backwards and forwards with an ease that made it almost look like genuine pedestrianism. It was the caricature of progress to him. He felt himself gaping and a fool on solid ground whilst they pirouetted and balanced on invisible footing above his head.

After two of these encounters when he could not have told what her aspect of him was, he returned to Littlecote, preferring the dust of

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disintegrating plaster and debris to the perfumed airs she lived in. He was none the less determined to make her his, none the less confident that that was the meaning of their meeting on board ship. This was the breed of which Spurriers had come, and the more he saw Littlecote returning under pick and hammer to its original beauty, the more convinced he was that she was the mate for him. He had no doubt she could teach him this wire-walking business. He had the honest conceit of conviction he could learn. These encounters had not dismayed him.

"Three more months," he said to her as they parted in a London drawing-room, "and I'm ready for you. There'll be no question of a body needing time to think when you see what we've done. I'm saturated in your architectural history now. Mullions and transoms and arches are the A B C of it all to me now. I've a whole collection of books on the English Manor House. Littlecote'll be one of the show places they tell me. I'll open your eyes."

But her eyes had opened before the three months were over. He received a letter from her six weeks later.

"I don't know why I feel you ought to know," she wrote, "or whether it is most that I feel I

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want to tell you. I'm engaged to be married. He's an American. I never thought I should like any but an Englishman. What a little we know of our likes or dislikes once people are kind to us. He is kindness itself. We hope to be married this winter. In the meantime he returns to Chicago to get a divorce from his wife. How much they are in advance of us. He comes back in December. I suppose this will be my last summer in England for two or three years. It gives me time to see Littlecote, if you still want me to. Next time I am staying at Brinscombe shall I let you know or would you like to be surprised in your oak panelling?"

He folded the letter up and put it in his pocket. That morning, behind the grate in the Tudor chimney, they had discovered, as she had predicted, the old fire-back originally built into the brick. The foremen of the builders' men came to let him know that it was cleaned up, ready for his inspection.

He followed the man into the oak-panelled room.

"Some sort of moulding on it," said the foreman. "We can't make out what it is."

Spurrier knelt inside the fireplace to examine it. It was the mailed arm of the Spurriers lifted

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to strike. He stood up, laughing. The foreman looked at him.

"It's a joke, is it?" he said.

"That's it," said Spurrier.

V

Events accumulated that summer. Sinking a deeper well, for Littlecote had no main supply, a seam of coal was discovered close to the house. On the advice of Robert Horridge, the matter was inquired into. It yielded such prospects as could not be ignored. The solicitor was a practical man of the world. He admired the improvements to Littlecote, but coal was money. On his own initiative, he secured offers for the property that would have exhilarated any man but Spurrier in his present mood. Having restored the house, he had plumbed the full depth of his pride to live in it. Horridge found him exasperating. There was a clear profit of twenty-five thousand pounds and he did not leap at it.

"Have you no feeling," said Spurrier, "about turning Littlecote into a pithead and the village into a colliery town?"

"I think of the people it would employ," said Horridge. "This is a highly industrialized country. We must be free to live. Money's freedom."

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The nearest Spurrier went to accepting the offer lay in the fact that he did not definitely refuse it. He had heard that Evelyn Ankerson was staying occasional week-ends at Brinscombe. An unshakable belief in himself made it impossible for him wholly to believe in her American marriage. She would marry him of course if nothing intervened. Like Horridge, she was probably saying to herself that money was freedom. But she had not seen Littlecote since its restoration. More to him even than that was the fact that he had not seen her alone since the day she had lunched with him. He had not forgotten the last phrase in her letter—"or would you like to be surprised in your oak panelling?" If there were anything in that, she must prove it by coming to him.

It was a surprise, as she had promised, when she did come. One of the long evenings of that summer, he was sitting in the panelled room when she knocked at the window. With a cloak about her, over her dinner dress, she had come over from Brinscombe in her little car. Alone. He stared a long moment before he let her in.

All his first impressions of her on board ship returned when she took off her cloak and threw it across a chair and showed him shoulders and arms he had not reckoned to see without others

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sharing. It was hard to believe she was there at last. He sat back in his chair watching her, half believing this was not the first time nor the last that she would be sitting there like that.

There was no doubt about her admiration for the room. But guarding himself with a distance of mind, he determined it was not this that had brought her. Nor to boast of her American. He had money. She owned that too frankly to allow of her being in love. Was love in her composition? Why had she come? Did curiosity bring a woman that distance to see a roomful of oak panelling? He was not disposed to think it did.

He soon realized she was resenting his pressure to make her talk about her marriage. She shifted from his questions.

"Show me the rest of the house," she said.

He rose from his chair. He allowed her to rise, thinking his movement meant compliance. As she turned to the door, he caught her arms. She offered no resistance.

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

"I told you—to see the house."

"Why at this hour of the day?"

"No particular reason. There was nothing doing this evening. I thought I'd like the run over."

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"Mere idle curiosity?"

"So human," said she.

"Curiosity doesn't go about dressed like that," he replied.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you and your people ever talk square to each other?" he asked.

"A square is such an uninteresting shape," said she.

"It's one of the primitive forms," said he.

"Do you want to talk square to me?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"You came here to show me what another man had bought."

Her eyes did not flicker.

"You came here to see me covet it. Isn't that true?"

"Yes."

That admission was the essence of the moment. It was something like this she had expected from him. To have denied the charge would have been to lose all value of the sensation. What would he say to that? It was a moment when one of his nature might strike her. She thought that unlikely, but anticipated it with a certain amount of excitement. He might take

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her in his arms. She did not care if he did. Some men bought their women, one way or another. She had not met Horridge but knew all about this being a highly industrialized country. Spurrier was the first man she had met who was not industrialized. He might take her. She was quite aware that she had come to be taken if he wanted her. She was going to Chicago when her American had divorced his wife. To have denied that charge would have been to lose all she had come for that evening. She said "Yes" again and could have laughed at her pulse quickening when she felt his hand tighten on her arm.

But he did not strike her. He did not take her in his arms. He let her arm fall as though it were a fruit he had picked that was rotten, and he walked away from her to a desk at the other end of the room. He brought back a paper.

"Read that," he said.

It was the offer of purchase. Fifty thousand pounds.

"What are you going to do?"

"Take it," said he. "Take it back to Australia. This place ought to have been a coal mine long ago."

POOR MISS DELPHI

How it came to be known that Miss Philadelphia Dobson was engaged to be married is not traceable to any direct statement to that effect. Rumour is the child of gossip, and gossip being what she is, a creature of secretive habits, there is no telling how her offspring get about.

Certainly Miss Philadelphia did not try to hide the fact that she wore an engagement ring. But when a woman comes to the mature age of thirty-nine it is more reasonable to assume that symbolic jewellery of this nature relates to the past.

Mrs. Liversedge was the first of society in Haffenden to call upon the Misses Dobson when they came to the Four Throws. The Four Throws is that small, red-tiled house that stands at the cross-roads where the road to Bethersden bisects the way to Smarden. She came away with the most favourable report.

"They've lived all their lives in a house at the corner of a street in Huddersfield," she said. "Now their people are dead, they've come down here to Kent to live the rest of their

Poor Miss Delphi

days in the peace of the country. If you want to acquire a belief that the world is the next place to heaven and that happiness is as possible to you as the air you breathe, go and call on the Misses Dobson. Apparently they feel like two calves let out into a meadow the first warm day in spring. They almost behave like it. I believe they would if they were younger. Their conversation is certainly an exhibition of leapings and boundings in a kind of ecstasy of freedom. Everything is wonderful to them. They talk of the trees in their garden with a ‘he’ or a ‘she,’ as though they were live people and their own particular friends. They have two cats, which is proper for two old maids. Miss Harriet’s is called ‘Eustasia,’ which seems to coincide with the fact that Miss Harriet has never had anything to do with the male sex. Miss Philadelphia’s is called ‘Strephon.’ She wears an engagement ring. Her romantic past. I suppose that’s why Strephon belongs to her. There’s always a significance somewhere. A broad smile never leaves Miss Harriet’s face. She wears big garden hats but can’t hide her smile. Miss Philadelphia makes little jokes that delight Miss Harriet. She told me she was called ‘Philadelphia’ after her mother’s

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favourite sister, who went out to America the day she was born."

"Of course my mother couldn't go and see her off," she said. "So, in honour of her departure, I was called 'Philadelphia' because that was the town in the United States where she was going to live. The first letter my mother got from her, she said she had changed all her plans and gone to live in Boston. That's the sort of thing that's happened to me all my life."

"This," said Mrs. Liversedge, "is one of Philadelphia's little jokes. Miss Harriet has probably heard it a thousand times, but she'd no more get tired of loving it than she would get tired of loving Philadelphia. They were made for each other. Don't tell me that marriage is the only state for a woman. Rubbish ! Go and call on the Misses Dobson."

This is the kind of thing you must expect if you live in the country. The paying of calls is a process of investigation. You must submit to it. Your character, your clothes, your reputation, your manner and your accomplishments are all subject to a picking-over at various tea-tables. There is nothing to complain about in this. Civilization is only a veneer, as

Poor Miss Delphi

thin as the piece of paste-board you leave on the hall table to convince those who might forget it that you have been inside the house.

So it was Mrs. Liversedge, expert in the matter of first calls and preliminary reportings, who made it known that Philadelphia wore an engagement ring. Having regard for Philadelphia's age, it was not unreasonable for Mrs. Liversedge to talk of her romantic past.

But gossip is not satisfied with the mere reasonable explanation. No child of rumour is ever begotten out of a union of common sense and Christian charity. Because no man ever made his appearance at the Four Throws, gossip was in no way content with the assumption that Miss Philadelphia's romance was entirely in the past.

In the first place, there was Mrs. Pepper who rendered her services to the Misses Dobson —such as those services were—from seven o'clock in the morning till midday. As an opportunity for work, this amounts to five hours. But five minutes in another body's house was sufficient for Mrs. Pepper to discover all there was to be known about them. Everybody in the neighbourhood had employed Mrs. Pepper at one time or another, convinced by

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the geniality of her red cheeks and the readiness of her smile that she was a treasure of a woman. Sooner or later they found their most intimate affairs strewn around the village. Everyone was handling them. It was like finding the privacy of one's bedroom broken into by a burglar and all the secret contents of one's cupboards thrown about the floor.

From Mrs. Pepper it was learnt that strange things happened that first Christmas at the Four Throws, things which, with information supplied by Mr. Watkins, the grocer in Haffenden, and little remarks let fall by the old postman, needed more explanation than that of mere festivity. An elaborate meal was prepared. Mr. Watkins testified to the unusual quantity of things that were ordered, materials for mince-meat, plum puddings, almonds and raisins, and two boxes of crystallized fruits. The postman told of their anxiety to receive a letter from abroad.

"They ask me every morning," said he, "like two cuckoos comin' out of one clock. No sooner do I knock on the door than out comes one head, then t'other, and when they've turned over their letters, they both looks up and says, 'Are you sure there's no letter with

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a foreign stamp on it you might have overlooked? I don't overlook nothing."

But it was Mrs. Pepper who put facts together into a composite whole and made a tangible rumour of it. Returning unexpectedly on Christmas Day after her midday departure, with intention to satisfy her curiosity, she found Miss Harriet and Miss Philadelphia seated at either end of the table in the dining-room while on one side a place was laid in front of an empty chair.

There were crackers adorning the repast. On the sideboard were the dishes of those luxuries that had been testified to by Mr. Watkins. But most of all in the birth of that rumour to which Mrs. Pepper acted in the capacity of competent midwife, was the surprise and consternation with which her unexpected appearance was greeted.

"I'd left me umberella behind me," she told Mrs. Watkins, "Because I didn't want it to seem I was just comin' back to spy on them like. I hates curiosity in people what pokes into affairs as doesn't concern 'em, and they're nice people, the Misses Dobson. I wouldn't like 'em to think that about me. So I slipped in at the back door. I could hear them talkin' in

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the dinin'-room. Then just to see if they wanted anything—Christmas Day you see and them by themselves, with no one to wait on 'em—I opened the door into their room and I looked in and I says, ‘Come back for my umberella, Miss—is there anything I can do for you?’ Well, I was quite ready to stay a minute or two if they wanted anything. I didn’t know they was going to take it like they did. But up they jumps, both of ‘em from the table at once, tryin’ to hide the empty plate and prevent me seein’, you see, as they’d expected company. I shouldn’t have noticed it so much if they hadn’t done that, but there they were, goin’ on and their faces all red with excitement, as if I’d found ‘em out doin’ what they ought not to.

“‘We don’t like bein’ disturbed at our meals,’ they said. I’d never heard ‘em talk like that before. Most pleasant spoken they are as a rule. Well, it’s not for me to stop where I’m not wanted. I’d only offered to do some little thing for ‘em, me bein’ there out of my time, as I was, cos it was after one o’clock. So I said, ‘Sorry if I’ve intruded, Miss’—intruded, you see, showing ‘em that I’d noticed something—and I went back home. But I saw the place they’d laid and there was a wine-

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glass beside it and a decanter of porty lookin' wine on the table. Wine, if you please, and they never touch it. Well, you don't put wine out on the table if it's a woman you're expecting—do you?"

Mrs. Watkins admitted she did not. She was quite ready to believe it was not the custom of anyone else either. It was indeed that decanter of wine and the wine-glass by the empty plate which gave just that turn to gossip as brought this secretive and sensitive creature to bed of a fine child of rumour. It was said all through the village of Haffenden that Miss Philadelphia Dobson was expecting her lover on Christmas Day. It was known as a fact that he did not turn up.

One of the peculiar characteristics of rumour is her predilection for affairs of the heart. Whatever is strange in the doings of some man, she will trace to some woman. Whenever a woman departs from the monotonous course of exemplary behaviour, she argues the existence of some man at the bottom of it all. What is more peculiar is the frequency with which she is right.

It was her lover whom Miss Philadelphia was expecting that Christmas Day. For three years she had expected him, ever since that day

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when, at the last wish of her father, Sandy Harrup had booked his passage for Australia and set out to make such a career of his life as entitles a man to assume the responsibilities of a husband.

Mr. Dobson was a shrewd man. He knew the world. Perhaps he knew it too well. To others beside his daughters he may have seemed hard when he drove Sandy Harrup out to Australia to make his living.

"When I die," he said, "my two daughters 'll have a bit of money—enough to live on. I've saved it for 'em. I haven't saved for any man who comes along and wants to take life easy at their expense. If you love Delphi—provide for her. That's what love is. I don't believe in none of this heart-to-heart stuff. My idea of a man loving a woman is when he wants to take her through life with him and give the best of his right hand to protect her. That's what he did in times gone by. 'Tis the same thing now, only he must use his hand for making money. You find a career for yourself, and if she loves you as much as she says she does, you'll find her waiting for you when you've made it."

All this had sounded hard principle to a

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woman of Philadelphia's age, who might never marry if she did not marry then. But there was no question about her father's determination. Sandy Harrup had had to go out into the world. He chose Australia, making an oath when he went that he would return on Christmas Day to claim her.

But which Christmas day? Mr. Dobson had died—the two sisters had moved to Haf-fenden ; then Christmas days had passed, and during all that time there had been no word of Sandy Harrup.

With the contrivance of rumour and such small gossip as is never idle amongst small communities, the two Misses Dobson at the Four Throws came to be regarded as two old maids with a tragedy between them. There were no two people more popular in the whole neighbourhood. In two years they came to be known as "dear Miss Harriet and poor Miss Delphi."

Looking across the breakfast table one morning at her sister, Philadelphia said :

"Harriet—did you realize that people here know about Sandy?"

Harriet had known it for months but would not hurt her sister's feelings by telling her of it. She bent her head over the egg she was eating and said nothing.

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“ Harriet.”

Harriet looked up.

“ It seems to have made people very nice to us.”

“ I think the people here are lovely,” said Harriet. “ They’re frightfully nice.”

“ If Sandy did come back,” continued Philadelphia, “ I suppose I should have to go out to Australia with him.”

Harriet smiled, the broad smile that Mrs. Liversedge had seen, incapable of being hidden even under the broad brim of her garden hat.

“ If he’d made his life out there, of course you’d have to go and share it with him. I’m sure Australia’s a lovely place.”

“ Would you come, too, Harriet ? ”

“ He might not want me, Delphi. I don’t think Sandy ever liked me very much. Besides —how about the house here ? We should have to sell that, and we’ve done such a lot to the garden.”

“ Do you mean you’d stay on here alone ? ”

“ I think so.”

Philadelphia seemed at a loss for words, and when Eustasia jumped up on to Harriet’s lap and she saw a picture in her mind of Harriet alone there with her cats and the garden and

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all the friendly people in Haffenden, she exclaimed : " Life's very difficult."

" It's very beautiful," said Harriet.

Another Christmas Day passed by and no Sandy. When the meal was finished, Philadelphia took up one of the crackers and held it across the table to Harriet. This was extraordinary. Philadelphia had never done this before. Always they were gathered up and put away in a box to be given to the school children who came singing late carols on New Year's Eve. Here was Philadelphia holding one out to be pulled as though it were a joyous occasion and not the day of recurrent disappointment towards which they both looked with dread and misgiving every year.

" Do you mean you want me to pull it ? " asked Harriet.

Philadelphia nodded her head. She felt like a child doing some forbidden thing and glorying in the mere act of disobedience. Snap went the cracker inside. Harriet's voice rose to a little scream of delight. Philadelphia looked as though she were actually enjoying her Christmas. The business end of the cracker remained in her hands. She was chuckling in the anticipation of discovering what was in it. There

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was a cap with long pink paper ribbons to tie under the chin. She put it on.

"Oh—it looks awfully sweet!" cried Harriet.

While Philadelphia was jumping up to look at herself in the glass, Harriet thought of the motto. There was always a motto. Leaning across the table she found it amongst the crumpled paper. With hurried fingers she spread it out and read :

"Think of me whene'er you ponder.
Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Of course it was only a motto, but there was also something extraordinarily apt about it. Snatching one glance at Philadelphia's face reflected in the glass, she crushed it into a ball in her fingers, and hid it in her dress. She was amazed at herself. It was deceiving her sister. She had never deceived her in her life before. Why had she done it? She could not say. She knew, but could not tell herself the truth. It was because she hoped that Philadelphia was beginning to forget her disappointment. The next moment she knew how deceitful she had been. Philadelphia had snatched the paper hat

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off her head and was turned about with a look of remorse in her eyes.

"We're forgetting all about Sandy," she said. "It's four years now."

In silence they gathered up the crackers and put them away in their box. In silence they locked up the decanter of port and the empty wine-glass in a cupboard of the sideboard. In silence they sat by the fire, Harriet reading one of her detective stories, Philadelphia doing her jig-saw puzzle; both of them wishing that Christmas Day was over so that they could begin another year together without the tragic presence of Philadelphia's unfulfilled romance.

However gossip may have concerned itself with them for the next twelve months was a matter of sublime indifference to the Misses Dobson at the Four Throws. At least it may be said that gossip is not a nagging woman. She prattles, but she does not nag. It is the newest tale that takes her fancy.

Miss Harriet and Miss Philadelphia were left in peace to pursue the interests of their garden. This and the wide meadows about the Four Throws was their world. After the corner of a street in Huddersfield it was like a transportation into the fields of heaven to them.

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All their lives they had longed for a garden. Philadelphia's head was full of the Latin names of flowers. Harriet's eyes were alive with their colours. But they had no practical experience.

However, the god of gardens is good to some people. He grants some special dispensation to those that really love him. They have only to thrust a plant root endwards into the soil and it will grow. It was this way with Harriet and Philadelphia in the garden at the Four Throws. They had merely to do the weeding and the sowing. The god of gardens did the rest.

That fifth year of their residence in Haffenden was the happiest they had known in their lives. They exuded happiness. It shone from them, a resplendent glow wherever they went. They did not know it, but people came to see them for their happiness. A visit to dear Miss Harriet and poor Miss Delphi was as good as taking the waters. They were a tonic.

They never admitted it to each other, but this increase of their delight in life was largely due to the fact that in their hearts they believed Sandy Harrup would never return.

“I know it would be a tragedy for poor

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Delphi!" Harriet told herself, such times as when in the seclusion of her bedroom a woman talks aloud with that remote inner voice to herself. "But I can't help thinking she's happier here with me."

In the more silent recesses of her mind, Philadelphia argued that great though the duty was in every woman to be married and bring children into the world, there was something inexpressibly joyous and free from care in her life with Harriet at the Four Throws.

The wearing of the paper cap that Christmas had set them thinking like this. Philadelphia had realized it was possible to forget, if only for a moment. In that moment, Harriet had seen a woman set free from the prison of her mind.

Nevertheless, when it came round to Christmas again, they gave their usual orders to Mr. Watkins.

"Poor Miss Delphi is still expecting her man," said gossip in Haffenden, whereupon Mrs. Liversedge and others sent them little presents, a bag of cob nuts, a half-sieve of Cox's Orange Pippins, tithe from the land as it was paid before they turned the whole transaction of life into pounds, shillings and pence.

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"I do think the people here are frightfully nice," said Miss Harriet.

There was heavy snow on the ground that Christmas, the first time since they had been to Haffenden. Snow in Huddersfield was slush as soon as it fell and soiled with the dirt of the streets. Here it lay white like a sheet of wool over the meadows. Even where it was beaten down at the cross-roads outside their door it had a cleanly, frosted look. Involuntarily, they lost the real significance of their Christmas party, and this year more than ever they felt it just to be their own.

Like two children invited to a party in a strange house that did not belong to them, they sat down to table. A little restrained they were at first and awed by that yearly expected presence of Sandy Harrup. The empty plate, the vacant chair, the wine-glass and the decanter of port kept, a watch over them like a martinet at the table, ready to reprove them for any lapse of good behaviour.

But as the meal progressed, as they ate the turkey which Harriet had carved, and by the time the plum pudding which Philadelphia had helped lay steaming on the plates in front of them, that expected presence became less exacting and less real.

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"Harriet," said Philadelphia. She always gave her sister's name before she made a remark, and Harriet always replied : "Yes, dear," to encourage her to continue.

"Isn't this plum pudding delicious?"

"I think it's frightfully good," said Harriet.

"Harriet."

"Yes, dear."

"Don't you think it would improve it just a little bit if we each had a drop of port with it?"

It was an astounding suggestion. It was like drinking the life blood of Sandy Harrup. For five years that wine had remained untouched in the decanter. It was, as it were, the symbol of the vitality of his existence. Harriet knew this. She knew that the consumption of that wine would inevitably destroy the illusion in Philadelphia's mind that she was a pledged woman. Of course they would not drink it all at once. But two small glasses this Christmas and again the next, and the decanter would soon be empty. Philadelphia would give up her life of waiting then. Her tragedy would be over. The last chill of the shadow would be removed from them then.

With as much restraint as she knew how to

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exercise in her voice, Harriet said she thought it might improve the plum pudding, if Philadelphia would really like it. With great control over her limbs, because she felt she wanted to run, she went to the sideboard and brought out two glasses. Philadelphia took the stopper out of the decanter.

The wine gurgled as it found its freedom into the glass. Philadelphia laughed. Harriet laughed with her. They drank their first sips and looked across the table at each other.

"Do you think it's spoilt by being in the decanter so long?" asked Philadelphia.

"It might be spoilt to a connoisseur," said Harriet, "but I think it's delicious."

Little by little, as they drank the wine, they lost the sense of restraint imposed upon them by the empty plate and the vacant chair. It became more and more certain in Philadelphia's mind as the wine ran warm in her blood that Sandy Harrup would never come back. It was five years now. For nearly that length of time she had never heard from him at all. Two letters had reached her from Australia. Then all communication had ceased. She realized that for the last five years she had been a woman in bondage, unable fully to enjoy the pleasures of

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life as Harriet did, yet with none of those joys which women have in bondage.

She emptied her glass. He would never come back. She knew it now. She looked across the table at her sister.

“Harriet.”

“Yes, dear.”

“I’m going to put that empty plate away. I’m going to stand that chair in its place against the wall.”

“Oh, Delphi!” exclaimed Harriet, and was not quite certain whether the joy she heard in her voice was not a little indecent in its eagerness.

It was the work of a moment. The chair was set back against the wall. The empty plate, the glass, the knife and fork and spoon were put away in the sideboard. They sat down at the table again, just their two selves. The presence of Sandy Harrup dominating their lives had vanished.

“Now,” said Philadelphia, “come on. Let’s pull all the crackers.”

“Not all, Delphi,” said Harriet; “the children would be so disappointed.”

They pulled one each. Each one set on her head the cap it contained. On Philadelphia’s

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head it was a jester's cap with little paper bells ; on Harriet's a crown. The room sounded to them as though it were filled with the noise of their laughter and the cracking of nuts, and then a knock fell on the front door. It echoed through the whole of the house. Then everything about them seemed to fall to silence.

" Shall I go ? " whispered Philadelphia.

Again the knock fell. It seemed to strike the door as a blow striking on their hearts.

" We'll both go," said Harriet, and together they went to the front door. When it opened to him, Sandy Harrup saw the white faces of two maiden ladies, with two paper caps on their heads.

" Hullo, Delphi," he said. " Hullo, Harriet. You know who it is—don't you ? Sandy—Sandy Harrup."

As though it were in a hypnotic state, they slowly opened the door wider and let him in. He came into the little narrow hall without further invitation. They had pictured this scene so many times. So many times they had heard that knock on the door. So many times they had seen him entering that narrow hall. There was nothing else to be done.

But it was not the Sandy Harrup they had ex-

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pected. It was not the Sandy Harrup they had known. Here was a man, shabby genteel. Even with their small experience of the world, they both had felt when they saw him standing on the doorstep in the snow, that there was a man who had made a failure of his life. He had walked from the station—two miles. The Sandy Harrup they had seen had always driven up in a car, if not his own, at least one he had hired. He had been well dressed for that wonderful occasion of his return. This man's clothes were worn. They were not in rags. Had they realized how some men live, they would have known that those clothes he wore had often been slept in.

"We were having our Christmas dinner," Harriet was the first to speak. "That's the room—the door on the right."

Going ahead of them, he obeyed her directions. His feet shuffled as with one who is tired and has walked long distances. They followed him into the dining-room.

He stood looking about him, while they went back to their seats. They could not bring themselves to sit down.

"Very nice," he said, "very nice, indeed. No place for me, Delphi. I told you I'd come

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back on Christmas Day. Might have got out a plate and a glass in case, mightn't you? Anyhow, you'll give me something to eat now—won't you? I'm a bit hungry."

Without a word, Philadelphia went to the sideboard. Harriet set out a chair.

"Festive, eh?" said he. "Port, too—port! You two young ladies do yourselves quite nicely since the old man died."

They both felt it, the insult, from him, to call them young.

"Oh, I heard the old man was dead," he went on, "soon as I landed. I went up to Huddersfield. Then traced you down here."

A wineglass, a plate was put in front of him. He sat down, not asking their leave.

"Well, Delphi," he said, "how about it? When are we going to be married? We ought to be mighty comfortable here."

"Here?" repeated Harriet.

"Yes—here."

"Haven't you made a career for yourself in Australia then?" asked Philadelphia.

"Career!" He laughed. "No! They want men out there with brute force and blasted ignorance. That's what they want. Australia's no good to me. This is where I'm going to

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make my career, if Delphi still wants to be a married woman."

The two sisters looked at each other. Harriet went to the sideboard and carved some of the turkey. Philadelphia stood behind her chair, staring at him.

"Not very enthusiastic, are you?" said he.

"It's been a long time waiting," said Philadelphia. "You can't expect a woman to wait for ever."

"This isn't for ever. I'm back."

"I know. But you aren't the same."

It was all she could say just then. She knew she must wait for ever, and the Sandy Harrup she had waited for would never return, only she could not put it like that.

"Do you mean you're not going to marry me after all?" he asked, and he helped himself to a glass of the wine from the decanter.

"Have you forgotten what father said?" asked Philadelphia. "It was not long before he died."

She added that because it seemed to make it more sacred.

"Mr. Dobson's dead," he replied, "and I should have thought all his old-fangled ideas would be dead along with him. Anyhow, you

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can tell me straight, can't you, whether you're going to marry me or not? Where I've been people don't waste time over words. They give a straight answer to a straight question."

"I think I should like to talk it over with Harriet," said Philadelphia.

"Talk it over!" He laughed, as a man laughs when he sees yet another failure in front of him. "Go on then. Talk it over. I'll eat my dinner and I'll pull a bonbon with myself."

They went upstairs. The paper caps were still on their heads. They had forgotten all about them. What they said up there in Philadelphia's room Sandy was guessing as he sat in the dining-room, helping himself to the turkey, the plum pudding, the crystallized fruits, and the wine in the decanter.

It was an hour before they came down. They knew what they were going to say. Philadelphia had steeled her nerves to say it. They did not know how he would take it. They were alone with him there in the house. The Four Throws was a quarter of a mile from the nearest habitation and the snow was thick on the ground.

Harriet held Philadelphia's hand as they entered the room.

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The scent of a strong tobacco stung in their nostrils. It caught their breath. They felt their hearts twittering like the sound of the young sparrows that were born every spring under their eaves.

The room was empty. The decanter was empty. The chair was pushed back from the table, and the table itself was shorn of all the little valuables it possessed, the silver that had belonged to the Dobson family which they had brought with them from Huddersfield—everything was gone. Sandy Harrup was gone.

They sat down in their chairs and stared at each other.

“Do you realize one thing?” said Harriet presently.

“What?” .

“He won’t dare to come back now.”

“No.”

“Are you glad, Delphi?”

“Yes—I’m glad.”

“But no one must ever know,” said Harriet.

“No—they must never know.”

“Because people have been so frightfully nice—haven’t they?”

“Frightfully,” said Delphi.

WHEN THE BLACKBIRD CALLS

“The drapers all around St. Paul’s
Hear nothing when the blackbird calls.
I would not be as rich as they
If I should lose this golden day,
Nor change the sallow buds I’ve plucked
For rents in Holborn Viaduct.”

THERE is this about a woman. Necessity, experience, and a certain native wisdom all contrive to gather men about her before and while she makes her choice. In these matters a man is a fool beside her; partly because he never realizes in advance what a serious undertaking marriage is, and partly because in the nature of the beast he is largely driven by imperative instincts which will not let him alone till he has obeyed them or been completely frustrated. Even after then he is known to persist.

But usually with a man who has the qualities of his sex, it is one at a time. The time may be short. His fancy may soon veer or back as happens with the wind in this variable climate. However it may befall, a man has this resemblance to

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a weathercock. He does not point in two or more directions at the same time. A woman does. So wisely. How can you tell from what point of the compass your golden day is coming? The weather prophets watching the depressions over Iceland and the Atlantic, with wireless and every conceivable invention, know little or nothing about it. At least a woman is honest. She admits her ignorance.

If young Jenny Pendred, assistant in one of those big drapers' shops round St. Paul's Church-yard, was considered a flirt, it was only because she frankly did not know her own mind and pursued the usual course of young women in these circumstances in her efforts to understand it. She collected and compared.

She served in the stockings. To a mere purchaser, this may sound all that, or less than it ought to be, but not at all what is meant. It means that from nine o'clock in the morning till six in the evening, she handled those garments in a certain department of that draper's shop. Now, whether it were mercerized cotton, or cotton and silk mixed, artificial silk or that pure silk which some women dream about and others run into ladders after one day at Goodwood and throw away, her hands, to Jimmy Punnett at the linen counter

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opposite, gave just the same thrill when they were thrust into a pair of stockings to display the excellence of these materials. But whether she were serving a lady who will look at nothing but the pure material, or one of those who spend a quarter of an hour deciding whether the lisle thread shall commence above or below the knee, made all the difference to Mr. Gossage.

Mr. Gossage in a black frock-coat and striped trousers and a high collar, full tie and boots that were a trifle big for him because of his constant moving about, was a shop-walker in that drapery business in St. Paul's Churchyard. He controlled the destinies of agitated customers who were looking for this, that and the other—usually at the same moment.

A woman will say : “ I want to get to the glove department, please,”—and before the shop-walker can help in what she wants, she will say : “ And where is the ironmongery ? ”

It sounds very silly, but it must be natural, or women would never do it.

By reason of a manner, a mode of speech and a deportment learnt in a school whose curriculum is one of the mysterious documents of industrial life, Mr. Gossage was recognized as being a pattern amongst shop-walkers. In surroundings

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where colours and materials are always being matched, this word—pattern—has vital significance.

As shop-walkers go—and anyone who has watched them, knows how they go—he was young. If you had guessed Mr. Gossage's age as thirty-four, which was right, he would have been entitled to look surprised at your accuracy. He was tall. He had a good figure. That black frock-coat fitted him suspiciously closely in the waist. To have said even as much as that is to do him an injustice. He would only have known a man's corset, had he seen one, from his acquaintance with that article of apparel in the lady's corset department.

He was clean shaven, good-looking and the way he put out a chair for a lady, or indicated a distant department, or signed the flourish of his initials at the foot of a bill was a pleasure to watch, always assuming that it is your pleasure to take an interest in these things.

The difference in Mr. Gossage's attitude towards Jenny according to what class of customer she was serving was apparent both to her and to Jimmy Punnett from his linen counter.

If, as has been said, she were serving a lady who did not know the meaning of mercerized

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cotton and would feel like a princess with a pea under thirty mattresses if plain cotton touched her delicate skin, Mr. Gossage was then so distant that you would be surprised to realize he knew Jenny's name when, in unemotional tones, he said :

“ Miss Pendred—forward.”

Seeing all this from his linen counter whether he were disengaged, or bouncing a bale of linen as he unwrapped it for a customer, Jimmy would mutter fiercely, but under his breath :

“ Swank! ”

Were it, however, one of those modest but impecunious young ladies, who are spiritually exercised about the length of silk that is likely to be seen when they are getting on a bus, Mr. Gossage's voice would take upon itself a certain familiarity. It was as though he did not mind its being thought there were romances that went on in these large business establishments which girls in offices never dreamed about.

“ Miss Pendred,” he would say, “ this young lady ”—for all ladies are young to a shop-walker except those who would make him look positively ridiculous by calling them so. “ This young lady wants ”—whatever she did happen to want and then he might go so far as to lean on the counter

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and, in an undertone, say : " You're looking O.K. this morning."

If Jimmy detested the one attitude, he fumed at the other. It was more than he could bear. Frequently he had to measure his linen all over again, for fear he had made a mistake.

It will be seen from this that to say Jenny had collected Mr. Gossage is not strictly accurate. To be collected, a man must be pinned down, a specimen of his kind. With his black frock-coat and striped trousers it can hardly be supposed that Mr. Gossage would let anyone pin him down and certainly not one on Jenny's side of the counter.

He had been known to unbend, to suffer himself momentarily to be collected once by one of those ladies who seem to take a pleasure in conversing with assistants in shops, with waiters in restaurants and policemen at their stations. Work had almost stopped in the department on that occasion while the assistants watched the play of the various expressions on Mr. Gossage's face. His pale, carved countenance had become strangely animated. He was another man. And it was that other man, so far removed from her approach, that Jenny Pendred wanted for her collection.

As yet she had only seen him on that one

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occasion. Even when she went to tea at his house out Blackheath way and met his mother, he was more the unapproachable Mr. Gossage than ever. Undoubtedly there was something significant in his asking her there, but his manner robbed that significance of all its thrill.

“ May I have the honour,” he had said, “ of taking you home to tea next Saturday afternoon to meet my mother ? ” But it was quite plain as he said it with whom the honour lay.

Some weeks had passed since that adventure, and though she had used all the allurements she knew, Jenny had come no nearer to pinning Mr. Gossage down for a close examination.

It was a very different matter with Jimmy Punnett. He laid himself out, as it were, for this process of collection and comparison. He came, it might be said, with the pin in his hand. It was a positive joy to him to feel the pain of his liberty being taken from him. After the demands of linen, all time at his disposal was hers to dispose of as she willed.

If it can be said that women are cruel over this process of selection, you may as well abuse the whole process of nature and have done with it. Whatever you do, the Jenny Pendreds of this world will go on selecting so long as they have that

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something, generally in the eye, which attracts men. They will pursue these practices of comparison as long as they have virtue to preserve, and that consequent ignorance of the ways of men.

Blessington's had what they called an "athletic ground" near Enfield. There, nearly every Saturday afternoon through the summer, Jenny played what is called tennis with the other assistants in the shop. Jimmy was always there, ready to play with her, if she wanted him; ready to pick up the balls for her when she played in those interminable contests known as "ladies' doubles."

Occasionally Mr. Gossage put in an appearance on the athletic ground. He sat on a chair and watched, but it was more like the Lord, resting on the Sabbath day and looking approvingly at His creation. There was something Mr. Gossage possessed—probably his dignity—which nothing short of a cataclysm could make him part with. This, together with his good looks, gave him a sense of desirable mystery to Jenny Pendred. He was unattainable. That was his power. Yet he gave her just enough encouragement to make her feel that one day, in some unexpected wave of emotion, he might ask her to be Mrs. Gossage.¹⁵²

Of Jimmy she was absolutely certain, but until she could pin Mr. Gossage beside his prostrate

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body, there seemed no sense in making up her mind one way or another.

Only one thing there was about Jimmy which she could not quite understand, and had never forgotten. There was nothing she could see or construct with her imagination in Mr. Gossage to put beside it. He had taken her one Saturday afternoon in late spring out into the country. They had gone in the train to Halstead in Essex, and from there, across the fields by a stream that wound in and out through incredible adventures, they had walked to Sible Hedingham.

The suggestion had been his. She was a town-bred girl and knew nothing of the country. Setting out, she had fancied that like as not it would be a dull affair. But the tennis courts at the athletic ground were not quite ready for play owing to previous rains, and there was nothing else to do.

Before they had left the train, she was surprised at his knowledge of the country. He told her which were the crops of winter-sown corn. He knew the different kinds of cattle that were grazing in the meadows. He pointed out a bull to her in a field, and she nearly fell out of the carriage window looking after it as the train turned on a curve of the line.

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But all this information was nothing to what he knew and could tell her of nature once they were out in the fields.

If she said she knew what butterflies were, she meant those white or brown things she sometimes saw near the athletic ground. But he showed her a brimstone, an orange tip, a hibernated peacock, and made them seem like creatures with lives and adventures separate from her own. If she said she knew anything about wild flowers, she meant she knew the poppy, the wild rose, and, of course, primroses and daisies and buttercups. Anyone knew those. But he showed her lords and ladies, veronica speedwell, lover's eyebright and spotted orchis, which until that moment she had thought was an exotic flower first grown by Joseph Chamberlain and since then by wealthy gentlemen, mostly Jews, in expensive hothouses. She had read in one of those magazines that set out to teach you everything and leave you very ignorant, that an orchid bloom might be worth a hundred pounds. A fact like this is worse than ignorance.

"Never knew it grew wild," she said, in amazement.

"Everything grows wild," said Jimmy, and had a feeling as he said it, that his love for her was of the wild and common variety, whilst that of

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Mr. Gossage—if, indeed, he was in love with her at all—was like the cultivated orchid in Mr. Joseph Chamberlain's coat. But the whole thought was too complicated for him to pursue it farther or put it into words.

She asked him why he lived and worked in London when he seemed to love the country so much, and for one instant felt that soul sense of desirable mystery in him as she felt it always with Mr. Gossage. There came a look of such deep longing in his eyes as he stared out across the fields before he answered, that for a moment she had a desire to understand him better. It was as though for the moment he had borrowed from Mr. Gossage his charm of elusiveness. As soon as he began to explain, it all disappeared behind material considerations, just as the intrinsic value of the orchid in nature was lost for her behind the bloom that cost a hundred pounds.

"I was brought up in the country," he said, "and one of the diseases you catch in the country some time or another is a fever for the town. I got it badly and came to London."

"To work in Blessington's?"

"Not at first. I went from one thing to another. I had to earn my living. I'd burnt my boats."

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“ What boats ? ”

“ My boats in the country.”

There was a sort of underlying chuckle in his voice which had deterred her from asking any more questions on that score. She assumed his father had kept boats on a river something like they did on the Thames at Hampton Court ; that one or two of them had belonged to him and that before leaving for London, he had burnt them. Her opinion of him as a practical young man fell considerably, yet at the same time there was something of a grand gesture in his burning those boats. She did not actually dislike him for it. But if ever he was her husband, there was certainly nothing he would burn like that unless it was of no material value. She had undoubtedly caught the classical flavour of his story, but it was as a modern young woman she judged him for it.

“ I did all sorts of things before I got into the linen,” he went on. “ I’ve got to stick at that now. It’s the best job I’ve had. But I’m saving a bit. Some day or other I’m going to live just outside London—Epping or something like that—in one of those little houses with a bit of garden where I can grow my own flowers and my own vegetables.”

She looked at him with a sideways glance.

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There was an ecstasy in his face. She could not have said what an ecstasy might be, but whatever it was she saw, stirred her to some unaccountable excitement. He had made her see a little house with a garden near Epping Forest. She prompted him with what she thought were subtle little questions to paint his picture more vividly.

“What vegetables?” she asked.

He told her the best way to grow peas—how to tie up lettuces——

“To give ‘em a stomach!” he said, and she laughed and laughed.

Within a few minutes he had put up a little greenhouse at the bottom of the garden. She had helped him put the putty on the panes of glass. Before they knew where they were, there were the plants of tomatoes growing there, flourishing, English tomatoes at a shilling a pound. Liking salads and regarding them as a luxury only to be indulged in on the rarest occasions, those tomatoes and those lettuces bursting their waistbands thrilled her.

“Cos, not cabbage,” he interposed—it all had the aroma of a fairy tale. His enthusiasm had the quality of making her see everything about that garden very vividly. As for flowers in the front of the house, having learnt nothing of

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them through her appetites, she let him say what was best. A clump of madonna lilies, two standard roses at the gate, a border of Mrs. Sinkins pinks round a flower bed filled with stocks and various things he would raise in boxes in the greenhouse at the bottom of the garden. It all seemed more beautiful than the gardens at Hampton Court Palace. And when, having arrived at Sible Hedingham, they had something to eat in the parlour of a little cottage which had a garden, he told her was just like the garden he was going to have—only that it had no greenhouse—she felt that dreams were so close to realities that there was nothing to choose between them.

But the next morning, when they regarded each other over their respective counters in Blessington's, it was hard to believe it had ever happened. Seeing him measuring out his yards of linen it was impossible to believe he would ever have a cottage and a garden like that. Observing Mr. Gossage place out a chair for a lady who wanted pure silk stockings, and hearing his distant: "Miss Pendred, forward please," it seemed that there in the grandeur of his deportment, was a romantic state of life that was a tangible reality. She let Mr. Gossage see the admiration in her eyes, and then went to the glass-

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fronted drawers where the best silk stockings lay in all their pure finery.

Then an extraordinary thing happened in the hosiery department. For the whole of one day, not only Blessington's, but Miss Pendred, one of its assistants, became the talk of the London papers.

A gentleman had come in with a lady and bought her twelve pairs of best silk stockings. That was exciting enough in itself. Jenny, who attended to them, saw herself contributing to a trousseau. There was, too, a commission for her on an order like that. Tragedy followed that romance. He came back with the whole lot the next day and said, on examining them at home the lady had not liked the material. Could he change them for something else in another department. In one fell moment the commission she had been counting on at the end of the week was snatched out of her hand. He had seen the droop in her eyes.

"Does this mean you lose commission on that order?" he had asked.

"Oh—it doesn't matter," she said, bravely—and smiled.

There must have been something nice about him, because he did not offer to compensate her

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with money which, of course, she would have refused. Instead, he pulled a letter-case out of his pocket, and drawing out six tickets, he gave her one.

"Never mind," he said, cheerily, "you take that—better luck next time."

He was gone before she could refuse it. She showed it to the other girls. She showed it to Mr. Gossage.

"Half-crown ticket for a Derby sweep," said he, "at his club. Cheap way of getting out of cheating you of your commission."

Mr. Gossage knew about these things. She assessed its value accordingly. She put it away in her bag and forgot all about it. Even when the odds for the race came out day after day in the papers, she never thought of looking at it again. And after the race was run, she did actually consider the need for tearing it up, but looking in her bag, she could not find it. Two days went by and the sensation of the Derby was all over. The third day, the gentleman walked into Blessington's shop and went straight to the hosiery department.

"I want to see the young lady who served me with a dozen pairs of stockings a few weeks ago."

Orders for best silk stockings by the dozen are not easily forgotten.

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"Miss Pendred—forward, please."

Before a gentleman customer, the distance in Mr. Gossage's voice was immense. Jenny came from the other end of the counter.

"Good morning," said the gentleman. "Do you remember that ticket I gave you a few weeks ago?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you happen to have it with you?"

"I had it in my bag—but I'm afraid it's lost. I looked for it the other day to tear it up and I couldn't find it. I certainly put it there."

"Have you got your bag here?"

"Yes—it's in the dressing-room."

"Would you mind going and getting it, and if you find the ticket, don't tear it up in a hurry."

There was a funny sensation, not exactly in her heart but as though the blood it was pumping all turned to water before it reached her extremities. She felt weak in the legs as she walked to the assistants' dressing-room. She had sometimes read notices in the paper informing people of a particular name that if they called at the offices of a certain solicitor they would learn something to their advantage. She had tried to imagine what those people must feel like, reading that unexpectedly in the paper. Now she knew. They

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felt weak in the legs. They laughed foolishly at the sound of their own names as she laughed when, turning her bag inside out, she discovered the ticket tucked away in one of the folds.

When she returned to the counter, the gentleman had not vanished, as she had thought quite probable. Instead, two or three of the girls were doing useless things near by, and Mr. Gossage was lingering effectively in the vicinity.

She handed the ticket over the counter. The gentleman took it, examined it and consulted a letter which he held in his hand. Then, with a suppression of all emotion which conveyed itself electrically to Jenny's already agitated nerves, he handed her a slip of paper.

"It's as I thought," said he, quietly, "this belongs to you."

The slip of paper was folded. She looked at it. It had a perforated edge. She looked at the gentleman.

She opened it. It was a cheque for two thousand pounds. She giggled. The next moment she found her eyes were hot and wet.

"Steady," said he, and she steadied. She did not know how it happened or where they came from, but in another moment every assistant in the shop was round about her. She pushed them aside

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to look for her benefactor, to tell him she could not take it, that it did not belong to her, that the commission on a dozen pairs of stockings, even with the present price of silk, did not amount to two thousand pounds. But he was gone.

The rest of that day was like a dream. Reporters were asking for interviews every five minutes. Autocratically, Mr. Gossage kept them ostensibly at bay at the same time that he surreptitiously gave them access.

" You might say, if you're writing about it," he said, " that I was the first to tell her what the ticket was. She did not even know she had a ticket for the Derby sweep. My name is Gossage —Mr. Gossage—I'm a shop-walker here. Yes—I'll let you talk to her for a moment if you want to."

By the time the early evening papers were out, Blessington's in the hosiery and linen departments was doing a huge trade. People were jostling each other as at a sale to see the girl who had won two thousand pounds in a Derby sweep in lieu of commission on a dozen pairs of silk stockings. Jenny moved to and fro like one in sleep and, close at hand, as though to protect her from any false step that might endanger her, hovered the black-coated and striped-trousered figure of Mr. Gossage.

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From the counter of the linen department opposite, unable to catch a glance from her agitated eyes, Jimmy Punnett saw Jenny disappearing from his ken as a ship sails towards the horizon and dips away out of sight.

"You'd better let me take you home," said Mr. Gossage, when the shutters of Blessington's were rattling against the windows.

She had an instant's thought of Jimmy Punnett at that moment, but he was nowhere to be seen. Mr. Gossage taking her home ! It was scarcely believable. She looked up at him submissively, and Mr. Gossage experienced a reflection of that weakness that comes over one at the sudden and unexpected sight of two thousand pounds.

* * * * *

Jenny Pendred came of solid stock. No one in the Pendred family had ever been known to make an absolute fool of themselves. None had ever had such opportunity as Jenny. There were two whole days when she thought of all the things she could buy. There was no one dependent on her. She shared rooms with one of the other assistants in Hackney. Who was to prevent her from spending that two thousand pounds just as she liked ? Yet for those two days a fundamental

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common sense came to her rescue. She cut a piece of material and sewed the cheque inside the band of her skirt and outwardly went on with her work at Blessington's as though nothing had happened. Inwardly she was still walking in a perturbed sleep, oppressed with the semi-consciousness of a belief that she might wake up at any moment and find it nothing but a dream.

That which slowly opened her eyes to a waking realization was the number of letters she received, begging for money. Five thousand pounds would not have been enough to meet the requests that were made of her by complete strangers. One of them began: "Surely you can't want all that money, having come by it in such a lucky way."

On the third day she was convinced it was no dream, and the fear of losing it drove her into the premises of a bank in St. Paul's Churchyard. She asked to see the manager. A quarter of an hour later, she came out with a deposit balance of one thousand nine hundred pounds, a current balance of one hundred, and a cheque-book at the bottom of her bag. She stood for a moment on the steps of the bank and took a deep breath of relief. She realized she had had a narrow escape. Looking back at the bank building, she knew that little piece of paper was safe at last. The manager had

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complimented her upon being a sensible young woman. She felt she was. But the greatest test lay still before her.

Many a woman's greatest extravagance is romance. That unattainable quality in Mr. Gossage had made him an essentially romantic figure in the eyes of nearly every girl in Blessington's. And now, not only on the pretext of protection from the crowd had he seen Jenny home that first evening of her good fortune, but his manner had completely altered since.

He did not now exclude her with an unseeing glance from the presence of his most select customers. Often as he put out the chair for a lady, he would smile as he said: "Miss Pendred—forward." He included her.

When she informed him what she had done with her two thousand pounds, he placed his hand protectively on her shoulder—on her shoulder and in front of the other girls!—and he said, not for their hearing: "Miss Pendred—you're one in a thousand."

Had he said she was one with two thousand, it might have been a closer expression of his sentiments.

She came instinctively to the knowledge that Mr. Gossage at last was collected. He would

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now, she was quite confident, adopt at her wish that supine and recumbent position necessary to the process of pinning down for comparison. She would be able to probe that enfolding sheath of mystery in which he was concealed.

It must be understood that in none of these delicate though apparent operations of the mind are women deliberate, or conscious at all of what they are doing.

When Jenny conceived the idea of a picnic for her friends in Blessington's, to celebrate her good fortune, she was in no way aware that it was to be a definite opportunity for comparison. She did not say to herself: "Now, I shall see these two men, side by side, in identical conditions entirely foreign to both of them. Under these circumstances they will react in accordance with their real natures. In Richmond Park—which is an excellent place for a picnic and won't cost too much in rail fares—Mr. Gossage cannot possibly feel what he feels in the hosiery department or even what he does at home. The same applies to Jimmy. There is something a man pretends to be when he is doing his business or when he's at home which is only a part of himself. You can only see the real part when you take him right out of his surroundings. I'll take these two out of

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their environment. I'll plump them into Richmond Park and I'll see which one I like best."

There was not one definite thought of this nature that passed through Jenny's mind. Still less had Browning taught her that a man has two soul-sides, one to face the world with, another to show a woman when he loves her. She had never heard of Browning.

All she did was to think she ought to celebrate her good fortune and that a picnic in Richmond Park, while it would not make a big hole in that current balance, would be the most appropriate way of doing it. Most conspicuously in her mind no doubt was the thought of inviting Jimmy and Mr. Gossage. But that was inevitable. She attached no more importance to it than that she wanted them to be there.

So it was arranged. There were nearly thirty of them. She did not realize she had so many friends in Blessington's. But every one had been so nice to her since her good fortune that she found herself compelled to ask girls whom, before, she would have looked upon merely as acquaintances.

She had first thought of taking them all by train. The sense of importance and responsibility was tremendous. She felt like a public benefactor on the scale of a Carnegie. In all these

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preparations she saw nothing of Jimmy. Since her good fortune he had kept conspicuously out of her way. He seemed afraid of her. When she invited him to the picnic, he said :

“ Are you sure you want me to come ? ”

But Mr. Gossage was a real help. He placed himself unreservedly at her disposal. A sense of dependence came upon her with all the thought and organization he displayed in his counsel.

She gave up the idea of the train and decided on a motor char-à-banc, because Mr. Gossage had thought that in the journey down to Richmond she ought really to travel first-class, whereas the others, of course, could go third.

“ I think,” said he, “ you ought to do that. We could travel in a first-class together. Just you and I.” To which he generously added: “ I don’t mind paying the extra for myself. I’m not going to put another expense on you like that.”

To avoid that, she decided on a motor char-à-banc. She sat on the front seat with Mr. Gossage on one side of her and Jimmy Punnett on the other. She was making comparisons all the way, but did not know it. There they were on either side of her in the scales of her comparison. She was the agate upon which they balanced.

The weight was all in favour of Mr. Gossage

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on that journey down to Richmond. He was in holiday mood. He wore white flannel trousers, a blue kind of yachting coat with brass buttons and brown and white shoes with black socks. It was hard to believe this was Mr. Gossage of the hosiery and linen departments, whose manner and deportment earned respect even from those customers who turned up their noses at the best cotton sheets and would not look at an artificial silk stocking.

He was even jocular. He laughed at the efforts of people in motor-cars who could not get past their char-à-banc. He criticized the occupants of passing vehicles with a pompous irony which in that holiday spirit was meant to be amusing and often succeeded in making Jenny laugh. It was not so much because it was really funny as that it was so unexpected. It was so unlike Mr. Gossage. She weighed it out as agreeability on his part and set it down to his credit. She could not understand what was the matter with Jimmy. He was monosyllabic. In the company of Mr. Gossage he was a dull dog. By palpable degrees the scales weighed down in favour of Mr. Gossage, who, after all, whenever she could realize it, was Mr. Gossage, the unapproachable shop-walker in Blessington's.

They arrived in time for a midday meal.

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Everyone helped to spread it out on the grass. Everyone except Mr. Gossage. It was perhaps natural in that company that he did not quite feel it to be his job. But when he proposed to Jenny that she should come with him for a little walk—"Just while they get ready for your ladyship," he laughed, and meant to please her—she was surprised to find herself feeling no pleasure at all. The scales registered nothing in his favour then. She looked across at Jimmy. He was laying out the plates in a circle on the grass. It looked as though he felt himself merely to be a servant. What had become of the assurance he had shown that day when he took her into the country and told her all he knew about nature? She felt she could never marry a man who was subservient. Was it to be Mrs. Gossage? She experienced a sensation of annoyance that it was deciding itself so easily.

It was after the meal, when the plates had been cleared away, that someone suggested kiss-in-the-ring. There was a shout of excited dissent from the girls.

"Why not?" said Mr. Gossage, unbendingly.
"I've got a clean handkerchief."

Again the scales swung in his favour. At least he was trying to make the picnic a success.

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It all began very mildly. Blindfolding was genuine. Everybody played the game. The most inappropriate kisses were given. The chases were decorous and proper around the immediate vicinity of the ring, and, when over, the victim, willing or otherwise, was brought into the ring's centre for everyone's amusement to see the salute.

But by the time Jenny was caught for the process of blindfolding, it had become little less than a farce. They were all peeping under the handkerchief. Every one of them knew she could see.

Who was it going to be? They all guessed right. Even Jimmy Punnett, with his heart leaping for an instant from the dead weight in his breast, knew the result of her pretended gropings round the ring.

It was Mr. Gossage she touched, and, turning in his white and brown shoes, with his white trousers flapping over his black socks, Mr. Gossage ran like a hare. Snatching the handkerchief off her eyes, Jenny was after him.

Here was a test of him, a holding of the scales for almost the last point in his favour. Was he really going to try and get away? Or was he going to let himself be caught? Was she going to like it when he kissed her or was she not?

He circled once round the ring, then broke

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away under the trees. She followed him. All the others laughing went on with the game without them.

When at last she came up with him, she found herself beyond a little spinney of birch trees, out of sight of all the others. There he turned and, as she reached him, he caught her in his arms.

Somehow or other this was not her calculation. He had kissed her a dozen times, hot, breathing kisses, before she could struggle out of his hold. Then, in obedience to some impulse, instinctively self-protective, she smacked his face.

A few weeks after Jenny's picnic, Jimmy Punnett gave in his notice to Blessington's. The news ran round the shop. When it reached her ears, Jenny sought him out.

"Why are you going?" she asked.

"Because I want to get back."

"Where?"

"To the country."

"But those boats. I thought you'd burnt them."

The chuckle came back for a moment into his voice.

"I'm going in someone else's boat. I answered an advertisement. I'm putting the money

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I've saved into a small chicken farm a man has down in Sussex. He wants a little capital and a working partner. I'm chancing it."

This was at nine o'clock in the morning. Blessington's had just opened. There were no customers as yet. But the eyes of Mr. Gossage were upon them like a hawk upon two sparrows twittering.

"What's your lunch hour?" she asked.

"Half-past twelve."

"So's mine. Let's have it outside."

There was a room called the restaurant in Blessington's where the assistants could have their meals. It was not obligatory. They met outside the tradesmen's entrance at half-past twelve and went to an A B C shop in Ave Maria Lane.

He had to disillusion her about the boats. There seemed to be no common ground of understanding till he had done that. With some difficulty in giving up the picture in her mind, she substituted chickens for boats and could then listen to Jimmy Punnett's dream and the business. It was the poultry farmer's dream, every bird bringing in a profit of fifteen shillings a year. Five hundred birds, three hundred and seventy-five pounds a year. He was putting in a hundred pounds, all his savings, into an established farm

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down in Sussex. In return for that and his labour, he was to have a share in the profits.

"Pity you haven't got it all yourself," she said.

He laughed. That was a dream beyond the reach of business.

"Do you remember that little cottage at Sibyl Headingham?"

He nodded. Ave Maria Lane was fifty miles away.

"That cottage," she said, "with a little bit of ground."

"Four or five acres," he murmured.

"How much would that cost?"

"About three hundred pounds."

"And the chickens?"

"Houses, wire-netting, birds, an incubator, p'raps another two hundred."

"Could it be anywhere you liked?"

"Anywhere."

"Have you seen this place in Sussex?"

"Yes—I went down there two Sundays ago."

"What's it like?"

He described a little village under the Downs, where, instead of the motor horns the sheep rang their bells, and instead of the hawkers' cries on Ludgate Hill the blackbird rang his call. When he told her it was called "Didling," she laughed.

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She began saying to herself—"Didling—London—the Downs—Ludgate Hill."

"If he can't find a little capital," said Jimmy, "he's got to sell the place as it stands."

"Why?"

"He's tried to do too much at the start—spent more money than he's got—thought he was going to make a big living straight away. Lots of 'em do that."

Jenny was thinking almost too fast to speak. She leant across the marble-topped table with her eyes glittering.

"When are you leaving Blessington's?"

"Saturday."

"What are you doing on Sunday?"

"Going down to Sussex."

"I'll come with you."

He stared at her as she looked at her watch. It was half-past one. They were half an hour over their time.

Mr. Gossage's eye fell sharply upon Jenny as she entered the hosiery department.

"Miss Pendred," he said.

She came up to him smiling. All the mystery had disappeared from Mr. Gossage ever since that day in Richmond Park. She saw him no longer in his black-tailed coat and striped trousers. Her

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picture of his deportment was of a man in blue yachting coat with brass buttons, his white flannel trousers flapping over black socks and brown and white shoes as he careered before her.

" You're over half an hour late," said Mr. Gossage, looking at his watch.

" Yes," said she.

" May I ask where you've been ? "

" It makes no difference to the fact that I'm late," she said, " but I don't mind telling you."

" Oh, where have you been, then ? "

" To Didling."

" And where's that ? "

" Under the Sussex Downs."

He asked her if she had taken leave of her senses. She was inclined to admit that she had. She was still saying to herself—" Didling—London—the Downs—Ludgate Hill."

Then across the noise of the shop and the distant roar of buses round St. Paul's, she heard Jimmy's voice saying to a customer :

" Four and eleven-three a yard, madam, that is the best. But there is a cheaper quality if you like."

Then she knew she was quite sane. She had made her selection, that was all. She had chosen the best.

It is a considerable moment in any woman's life.

